

**Interviewee: Roy Melvern “Mel” Boggs**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 13 November 2002**

**Location of interview: living room of Boggs home, Woodbury, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2002**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, February 2003**

Roy Melvern “Mel” Boggs was born on 28 August 1918 in Des Moines, Iowa. His parents died when he was aged five, so Mel spent his youth with a variety of relatives in the Des Moines area. Mel graduated from Des Moines East High in 1936, spent 1936-41 as a plumber apprentice, and was working as a plumber when he decided in early 1943 to volunteer for the US Army Air Corps. At this time Mel was married (1939; wife Aileen Frazier Boggs) and had one child.

During the remainder of 1943 and early 1944 Mel completed Basic Training and several levels of pilot training, finally earning his wings at Ellington Field, Texas. After crew training in B-24 Liberator bombers in Tucson, Arizona, in July 1944 Mel’s crew was shipped to Europe and stationed at Shipdahn, England. As airplane captain, Mel completed twenty-nine combat missions before V-E Day in May 1945. With the end of the European war Mel was transferred stateside and scheduled to be an instructor for B-29 pilots, but the end of the Pacific war in August 1945 made this unnecessary. He was discharged in November 1945 with the rank of captain.

Mel worked as a plumber before starting his own plumbing contracting business in 1968; he kept this business until retiring in 1995. At the time of this interview (2002) Aileen and Mel Boggs lived in Woodbury, Minnesota.

This interview provides numerous details on the life of a bomber pilot in Europe – life on base, flying missions. Also good for readjustment postwar.

**Interview Key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**M = Mel Boggs**

**Aileen Boggs (wife of Mel) adds occasional comments**

**[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.**

T: Today is the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2002 and this our interview with Mel Boggs. First, Mr. Boggs, on the record let me thank you very much for taking time this evening to speak with me.

M: You're welcome.

T: We've been talking for some minutes now and here's a little bit of what we already know. You were born on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1918 in Des Moines, Iowa. How many brothers and sisters did you have, Mel?

M: I have one sister four years older than myself.

T: Tragically your parents both died when you were young, about age five. You spent the time through high school living with a number of different relatives. Mostly in the Des Moines area?

M: Yes. For a while in Prairie City, Iowa. That's a small town near Des Moines. I spent a year in Prairie City.

T: The other times were in Des Moines. You mentioned your grandmother and an aunt and uncle.

M: Yes.

T: You graduated from East High in Des Moines in 1936 and then went to work as a plumber's apprentice, is that correct?

M: Correct.

T: You did that for a number of years. In fact I think until you went into service, is that correct?

M: Yes.

T: You entered service of March of 1943 and did you enlist or were you drafted?

M: I enlisted.

T: You enlisted. You were discharged in November of 1945 with the rank of captain. While in service you were a pilot serving with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force 44<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group 68<sup>th</sup> Squadron and you flew B-24 Liberator bombers in Europe a total of twenty-nine missions before V-E Day in May of 1945. You returned to the States in June of 1945 and were discharged in November of that year. After the service you continued in the plumbing business until you started your own contracting business in Iowa City in 1968 and you did that until you retired in 1995. You've been married since the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1939 and your wife's name is Aileen. You have two children and your son was born before you went into service in 1942. And you've been a resident of Minnesota since 2000?

M: Yes.

T: As someone who graduated from high school in 1936, I'm wondering if you have any specific memories of growing up in the 1930s?

M: Oh, yes. Yes, I do have. Times were still pretty tough then. The Depression wasn't over. Nobody was looking for another mouth to feed. Nobody had any surplus money. It was pretty tight. I lived with an aunt and uncle and had for several years. My aunt got pregnant. I still had one more year of high school to go. My aunt got pregnant and they told me that I couldn't stay there anymore. So I found another aunt and uncle that I went and stayed with for another year that was close enough that I could stay at the same high school and I graduated from high school. I had a job. I worked after school in a grocery store.

T: Ironically, so did I in high school. So you felt the economic impact of the Depression I guess in a real personal way it sounds like from actually where you had to live.

M: Oh, yes. Well, everybody was aware of it. Unless you were a small child. Times were tough. There wasn't extra money. Everyone was aware of it.

T: What's the first job you had, Mel?

M: You mean the first full time job?

T: Even in high school or before. When did you actually start working?

M: I worked in a grocery store. I had a paper route once. I didn't make any money doing that. I wouldn't have gotten through high school if I hadn't had that job in the grocery store. I worked after school and on Saturdays. In those days the stores weren't open on Sunday or I would have probably worked on Sunday. I worked every Saturday all day and Friday afternoon and Thursday afternoons.

T: When you say that you wouldn't have gotten through high school without that, what does that mean?

M: I didn't have any money. I was living with an aunt and uncle for my senior year because the aunt and uncle before that I'd lived with were going to have a baby and they asked me to leave.

T: They really just told you they couldn't afford you?

M: More or less. They said I'd have to quit school and go to work. So I said, I want to finish school. So this other aunt and uncle, who was my dad's sister, said I could stay there. They said as long as we got something to eat you can eat with us. So that's what happened. I stayed there. But like I say, I had this after school job which I could... school expenses. I had my own and what clothes I had I bought myself.

**(1, A, 97)**

T: What was life like as a young person growing up in Des Moines?

M: I suppose it was like most anyplace else. We were just coming out of the Depression and jobs were scarce. Nobody had any extra money to spend. If you had a job you were well off. At least you could make a living. That's the thing that everybody looked forward to. Not particularly so much what kind of job they had, just a job. An income.

T: Anything to earn money.

What kind of school did you go to? Larger schools or smaller schools?

M: Fairly large schools.

T: In the city there.

M: Yes.

T: When you were in school, what kind of things did you do to entertain yourself as a young person?

M: I'm thinking about when I got into high school. I think most kids come home from school and play with their wagon or something like that, but in high school I worked as much after school as I could in the grocery store.

T: When did you start working there by the way? How old were you?

M: I was probably about fifteen or sixteen.

T: So 1933 or 1934.

M: I started out just working sacking potatoes and things like that. Never waited on customers. Just stocked the shelves and that sort of thing. Ground hamburger. Flunky type work. Of course, we were just coming out of the Depression. Fifty cents was quite a bit of money in those days.

T: How much did you earn? Do you remember?

M: Yes. For working after school I got twenty-five cents. From after school until the store closed at five thirty. And on Saturdays I got a dollar for working all day Saturday.

T: What did you do with that money?

M: (*chuckles*) I spent it. Pretty much school supplies and things like that. Some clothing. I was able to get through with not having to buy too many clothes. Then I'd have to save some for bus fare occasionally. I'd walk quite a bit. I'd walk a long ways. I'd walk a long ways. In fact, I'd walk home from after work at the grocery store. I suppose it would be a good three miles. And I'd walk home in the dark. Because it cost a nickel to ride the streetcar.

T: When you only earn a quarter you don't want to...

M: Yes.

T: How did you get into the plumbing business after high school?

M: An aunt and uncle that I lived with, this aunt was bookkeeper for a plumbing company and when I was a child, or younger, I got acquainted with her two bosses. They were two nice fellows. Procter and Running. That was their name. Earl Procter and Bert Running. So they knew me when I was a kid. After I was out of school, I was down walking the streets looking for a job and I ran into them. The two of them. They said, "What are you doing?" I said I'm looking for a job. They said, "Would you like to be a plumber apprentice? Learn the plumbing trade." A job's a job you know. I really didn't realize what a good job it was to learn a trade at that time. I sure did learn. To make a long story short, I went to them and went to work for them as a plumber apprentice for eleven dollars a week. Forty hour week. By this time I was living by myself. I had a sleeping room.

T: So you moved out of the aunt and uncle's house where you spent your senior year in high school.

**(1, A, 157)**

M: Yes. I lived by myself. I had a room. Just a sleeping room. I ate my meals in a restaurant. I started working as an apprentice.

T: At that point, 1936, 1937, were you thinking more of just sort of living day to day or were you thinking where do I want to be in three years or five years?

M: I was real happy to get this job as an apprentice because it meant I was going to learn something. I was going to get a trade. So I was real enthused about it. The fact that my aunt had worked in that business before, I knew that they were pretty well paid, too. It was a union shop and there was a union scale and even the apprentices came under the union plan. Fortunately, I got into the apprenticeship because of the fact that those two fellows knew me. The two fellows that were in business. Because my aunt had worked there and I had come in and out of the place and they knew me. She didn't work for them anymore.

T: But otherwise you might not have got that job.

M: That's possible too. So that was a good break for me to learn a trade because I didn't have any money to go to college. I couldn't go to college.

T: You got married in October of 1939. How difficult was it to find a place that was suitable for the two of you to live?

M: It wasn't too bad I don't think. We found...

Aileen Boggs: A lot of people were renting out apartments in their homes.

M: We had a two-room apartment. A big living room and a kitchen and a bath. And we had a garage too. It was in a big old house that had been made into apartments. What did we pay?

Aileen Boggs: \$27.50. That was what you made a month.

M: \$27.50? I made that a week. But we paid \$27.50 a month rent.

T: When you paid \$27.50 a month did you consider that to be too expensive, about right, or pretty good for what you got?

M: About right. It was a nice little apartment.

T: Pearl Harbor came on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1941. You were already about twenty-three years old. You'd been out of high school for five years and you'd been working in the plumbing business as an apprentice for a number of years. Do you remember, Mel, what you were doing when you first heard the news about Pearl Harbor?

M: I can remember it. We were in church. We visited with Aileen's parents. We went to, it was Church of the Open Bible, wasn't it? Yes. We didn't go to that church, but we went to that church that night. It had been on the radio but we didn't really

understand what it meant. It didn't soak in. But that night at church I can remember the minister talking about it some. That was really when... that's my first remembrance of finding out about the war.

T: When it began to sink in what it might actually be.

M: Yes.

T: How soon did you begin to connect that event with how it might impact you for military service?

M: All of our friends, a lot of my friends, the guys I went to school with and Aileen went to school with who were single, were already gone. They'd been drafted and taken pretty early on. But I really didn't think, at first I didn't think about going because we didn't have any idea how long the war was going to last or what it was going to amount to. There were a lot of arms plants being built and factories. They started working overtime in the construction business, because they tried to build ammunition factories and things like that. You could work seven days a week if you wanted to. And that's what I did.

T: Really.

M: We made a lot of money, for what we had been making.

T: So you noticed an economic impact pretty quickly after Pearl Harbor?

**(1, A, 217)**

M: Oh, yes. Boom! Everything just flourished, but things were scarce too. You couldn't buy a new car or things like that.

T: So you had the money but there weren't always things to spend it on.

M: There were no cars being made. No.

T: Did you switch your line of work or did you stay in the plumbing business until you went in the service?

M: I stayed in the plumbing business. I had enough of my apprenticeship in that I could pass the test and get my license, so I was working as a journeyman when I left for the service in 1943.

T: How were your wages impacted by the sudden upswing in the economy?

M: Everybody was making a lot of money because we were working so many hours.

T: Was your hourly wage going up as well or just the number of hours?

M: Not too much. Just the hours we worked.

T: And you said you could work as much as you wanted.

M: Yes. And got paid overtime for it. Time and a half.

T: So that's where the extra money was coming in. It was not only extra hours, but time and a half, perhaps.

M: Yes.

T: Did you go to different job sites or did you essentially work the same place?

M: We worked at different job sites.

T: So jobs would come in to the company and you would be sent out to different places to do it.

M: Yes.

T: Did they hire more people as the war...?

M: There was a manpower shortage. There was a lot of construction work going on, but not enough mechanics to do it. And because there was a shortage they worked longer hours. I think I worked every Saturday. Yes, I worked every Saturday. I got time and a half for that. That was all figured into the cost of the job when the contractor bid it. He knew that he couldn't get enough help to do it on a five-day week. They'd have to work overtime.

T: Did you notice, was there increased turnover at the company you worked at? Were people coming and going, switching to new jobs?

M: Not that I noticed. I wasn't aware of that. The only place anybody was going was if sometimes they'd go off to a bigger city where there was a big project going where they were working seven days a week, twelve hours a day. Just to make more money. I could have done that too, but I didn't want to do that.

T: You could have worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week?

M: Sure.

T: What a switch from when you first got out of high school.

M: Yes.

T: Did the company you worked for increase the number of people that worked there?

M: Somewhat, but not a lot. It was just an average size place. To get additional help wasn't all that easy. There weren't that many people available.

T: So putting a help wanted sign up would not necessarily have worked.

M: They just took as much work as they could do. If a job came along and they had the manpower and the time to do it they'd take it, and if they didn't they just wouldn't.

**(1, A, 252)**

T: Did you notice either at the company you worked for or on job sites that you were at increasing numbers of women?

M: Not really at that time I didn't. Not in the construction business. There were no women. I don't think I worked on a job where there was a woman working.

T: That's important to know. You were earning more money. Did you move at all in this time or did you stay in the same place?

M: We stayed in the same place. We never moved. We stayed in the same place.

Aileen Boggs: We moved from the apartment to our house.

M: Yes, right. We moved into the house.

T: When did you move into a house? Before you went in the service?

M: Oh, yes. We bought a house.

Aileen Boggs: Before our son Steve was born. It was the fall of '41. The fall of '41 we moved into the house.

T: Were you optimistic enough about your economic chances at that time to actually make a house purchase? Is that what encouraged you to do it?

M: Yes. I was making way above average wages.

T: Because of the amount you were working?

M: Yes.

T: It sounds like if you bought the house in the fall of '41 that this upswing had happened a little before we actually went to war?

M: Oh, yes. Construction started because... we were making plants. We had arms plants going, making ammunition and stuff like that.

T: Before we actually got into it.

M: Yes.

T: That's interesting to know that. Mel, what did you notice as far as the impacts of war on your life? I mean, things like, you mentioned you couldn't get a car. Did you have a car already, a used car of some kind?

M: No. The company gave me a truck to drive. We drove a truck. A pickup.

T: So you could use that.

M: But we did buy a car. We did buy a car before I went in the service. I thought we got that old Durant. I thought we... no, I'm wrong.

T: So you were able to use this truck for some private business.

M: Drove to church and everything.

T: That was fortunate. So you didn't need ration coupons for that either? Gas ration coupons?

M: We seemed to get enough gasoline.

Aileen Boggs: That came after he left. After he left the rationing came in.

**(1, A, 281)**

T: Did you notice any impact as far as what you could or couldn't get from your perspective? You were earning decent money now. What was out there, or wasn't out there, that you wanted but you couldn't get, or you couldn't get enough of?

M: I really didn't want it, but just for an example, you couldn't buy a new automobile because they weren't making them anymore. They quit making them. This was true of a lot of products. If it wasn't a necessity, they didn't make it. It was all they could do to make the necessary things. Like gasoline. All those things were scarce. Rationed.

T: Gasoline didn't impact you so much because of having a vehicle that was owned by your company.

M: Right.

T: In 1943 you joined the service. What prompted you to volunteer, when you might not have been called up?

M: I just figured I would be. I was exactly the right age and everything. I was in good health. I decided I'd rather pick what I wanted to do than to get drafted and do what they wanted me to do. I enlisted with the idea of going into the Air Corps and becoming a pilot. This plan was there and I could pass the physical. I could pass the physical all right. I chose to enlist and get into that instead of waiting to be drafted.

T: Did your employer say anything to you about perhaps offering you a deferment because you were a skilled worker?

M: I don't think I could have gotten deferred on that basis. I don't think I could have.

T: How did your employer take the news when you told him you were quitting to join the service?

M: They hated to see me go, but he wasn't surprised.

T: Wasn't surprised? Why not?

M: So many people were leaving. Every place you turned, every company, were losing people that were going into the service and so it was just kind of a way of life. In fact, I was just exactly the prime age to go.

T: You were just about twenty-five.

M: Yes. That's just the way things were. Then the construction business was really hurt because if it wasn't government priority or something to do with the war, they didn't build it. All the jobs were ammunitions plant, or some kind of a factory, or something that was connected with the war. They weren't building any new houses. I don't think there was a new house in Des Moines built during that time there.

T: I think the same for St. Paul.

M: Yes.

T: What kind of discussions did you have with your wife, Aileen, about going into the service?

M: Our friends were being drafted and going and going, and so I more or less just figured out eventually... I had the feeling I was eventually going to be drafted anyway. So I decided I had this chance to choose what I wanted to do, and go that

way. [My wife] agreed to that too, because we just figured I'd eventually be drafted anyway.

T: What I hear you saying is that fact of really thinking that you were going to be drafted was what prompted you to actually go in.

M: Yes. If somebody said, you're absolutely not going to be drafted, I wouldn't have done it. I don't think I would have. I don't know.

T: Was it more difficult for you, this decision, because you had a wife and child at home?

M: Oh, sure, yes. You bet.

T: Basic training. What part of the country did you go to for Basic Training?

M: South mostly. Everything was Texas. Some in Kansas. But I went to Texas first.

T: Now, Texas is not Iowa.

M: No.

T: Was that the first time you'd been to that part of the country?

M: Yes, I think so.

T: How did you adjust to being away from home?

M: You had plenty of company. Everybody was in the same boat. I think it was easier for me than it was for my wife because I was kept so busy. I didn't have any time to feel sorry for myself. At night when I went to bed I was so dead tired I'd go to sleep. We were kept so busy. I think that was one of the reasons that it wasn't as bad for me as it was for my family. I think it was far harder on her than it was on me.

T: How hard did you find Basic Training? The actual experience itself.

M: I had no problem with it. That's the way it was, and if those guys can do it I can do it.

T: Did you feel at all challenged to succeed because you were there with younger guys? A lot of these guys were probably eighteen, nineteen years old.

M: Yes. I wasn't aware of age as being a factor because physically we all had to do the same thing. If you couldn't do it there was something wrong with you. You

wouldn't stay in there. If you had a bad back or something like that, they'd just wash you out and send you someplace else.

T: Different kind of people you were in there with. There must have been people from all over the country in Basic Training. How did people divide into groups, or cliques, in Basic Training?

M: I'm not sure I know what you mean by dividing because we were all in a lump together. You picked out your friends mostly because they're the ones you were with. They flew at the same time you did or you went to ground school together. If you run into somebody from Iowa, of course you'd make a little special effort to get acquainted with that person. I don't know. It just so happened that two or three of us did get acquainted and our wives got acquainted too. The wives would come down to visit us once in a while and I think... Did you meet Ginger down there? I don't know where you met Ginger. Do you remember?

Wife: That was in Kansas.

T: Was Aileen able to visit you from time to time at different...?

M: Yes.

T: You were in Basic Training and in different flight schools.

M: Oh, yes. We moved around. She didn't ever come to Texas.

Wife: I never came until you got your wings.

M: That's right. That's right. When we were cadets we didn't have any time off.

T: So you had a number of months without seeing your family.

M: Oh, yes. I think cadet training was about eight or nine months. We didn't see them.

T: What was the hardest part of the flight training for you?

M: I guess I had maybe a little bit of an inferiority complex in that some of my good friends had college education or were in college and I didn't. I just had a high school education; but it ended up my academic grade was as good as theirs.

T: The courses you took there.

M: Yes. The way we went there. But we had math and all that stuff as it pertained to navigation--plotting courses and routes and things like that. I could do that as good

as they could. I'm sure their education in some respects helped them, but then, in the things that I had to learn, I had no problem with it.

T: So this in a sense, the fact that you felt under-educated comparatively, did it sort of drive you to succeed even more?

M: Probably. But you see we didn't have any distractions (*chuckles*). We didn't get off the base. We went to class, you studied, you took a test. Your life was so regulated that you couldn't goof off.

T: If you did, you would have washed out, probably?

M: Yes.

T: Did guys wash out of pilot training?

M: Oh, half. Not from ground school. From flying.

T: Really?

M: Yes. The wash out rate was over fifty percent.

T: What did most guys wash out for?

M: I don't know. I never could figure it out. The first lesson I had I went out and I told my instructor, when we went to get in the plane, I said kind of apologetically, "I've never been up in an airplane." He said, "That's great. You don't know anything that I have to unteach you." Two of my friends both had taken flying--

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 385.**

T: So these friends of yours had taken flying lessons before they went in the service?

M: Yes. Two of my close friends did. Their two wives and my wife became close friends too. In fact, one of the wives came and lived with Aileen for a while.

T: Is that right?

M: We had a home and a little boy too.

T: Did those flying lessons help or hurt them as far as succeeding in the military as a pilot?

M: It didn't help them any. Like I said, I told my instructor apologetically, "I've never been up in an airplane." He said "That's good. I don't care. I don't have to unteach you."

T: So you were a blank slate in some respects and he could teach from the very beginning.

M: Yes.

T: What did you find personally most difficult about the pilot training process?

M: Putting up with some of the... nothing wrong with it... but military life. The rank. The different levels of privilege and so forth bothered me more than anything.

T: Did it really?

M: Although I didn't fight it. I went along with it. If you're a major you're better than a private as far as the military is concerned and I had a hard time accepting that.

**(1, B, 416)**

T: Did it get easier as time went on?

M: Oh, yes. You get used to it.

T: You get used to it.

M: But I was not a very good officer compared to what maybe they expected of me. My crew called me by my first name.

T: Did you encourage them to do that?

M: Yes. We all called each other by our first names.

T: Why were you more comfortable with that?

M: When you're out in that airplane you depend on each other. Your lives depend on each other. I didn't want any feeling that one person was better than another. We were all a team. It's just like in a football game or anything else. You gotta all work together and one is just as important as the other. Of course, we're all different. [For] some people, rank goes to their head. I had four officers. Four of us were officers. I only had one guy, my bombardier... rank went to his head a little bit. I had to straighten him out.

T: Was he younger than you, Mel?

M: Yes. Not much, but some. It was his character. He was a jerk. He was the only jerk I had on the crew, was that bombardier. But he was an excellent bombardier.

T: But his personality rubbed you the wrong way.

M: He did not associate with the rest of the crew at all.

T: Really? Off duty, that was it.

M: Yes. He didn't associate with us at all.

T: And he was an officer, right?

M: Oh, yes.

T: You got your wings in 1944 and then got together with your crew for the first time.

M: No. After that I went to B-24 transition. I learned to fly a B-24 then.

T: That kind of plane.

M: Yes. Then I got my crew.

T: Now, as a four-engine bomber, having four engines, does that make the plane easier or more difficult to fly?

M: I don't think there's that much difference between a single engine P-47 and a B-24 with four engines. The four-engine plane needs four engines to perform just like the single engine plane does. You take them all together. They're all necessary. I don't know. It doesn't take any longer to learn to fly a B-24 than it does a P-47 with one engine. It's all a part of what you learn and they all go together. All those four engines are alike so what you learn about one... they're all alike anyhow.

T: From your perspective as a pilot, what were the strengths of the B-24 Liberator?

M: I guess when you say the strengths, you mean in comparison to other planes.

T: Yes. To other planes. What made it a good plane to fly?

M: It was a little more difficult to fly than some. I've flown a lot of different airplanes and physically it was hard work. When I would land my bottom would be off of the seat. You'd pull as hard as you can on the wheel. It's hard work. You fly formation for eight hours. Close formation. You're pooped. The pilot's harder than anybody on the crew.

T: What makes flying in formation so difficult?

M: It really isn't difficult once you learn to do it. But that plane that you're flying off of, you can't hardly ever take your eye off of it. It's kinda like looking down the highway when you're going on a narrow road. You can't be looking around. You have to look down the road all the time. That's the way it is. When you're flying formation you watch that other airplane all the time. You never take your eye off of him because if he starts to turn he could turn right into you if you didn't turn. We flew close together.

T: So you have to constantly be aware of what everyone else is doing, particularly the plane right in front of you.

M: Yes.

T: When you sat in the plane can you describe where you sat and what was around you?

M: There were two pilots. A place for two pilots. A pilot and a copilot. Then the nose of the plane went on out past the windshield and there was a gun turret out there and a bombsight. So the bombardier and the nose gunner were up there in that nose part.

T: The both of them.

M: Yes. We also had a nose turret. Then we had one right up behind us, too.

T: So there were two people front, you and your copilot, and one more...

M: Then right behind me was the navigator. He had a desk there. And right above him was a gun turret. Then down in the nose was a gunner and a bombardier. Then back in the waist were two side windows. There was a gunner on each side and a turret in the tail.

T: A total of ten, the crew.

M: The crew was ten. Then when you got to be a lead plane, we had a radar in the plane and we bombed by radar. They called it different things then but that's what it was, radar. So we had a radar operator.

T: That made eleven for the crew.

M: That made eleven. And then if you were a lead crew, you'd have a command pilot with you. He didn't touch the plane. He was in command of the operation. He spent most of the time on the radio. That usually was a high-ranking officer. Major, or base commander, or operations officer, or something like that. A full colonel. General. In fact, I even had a general fly with me. He was our wing commander.

Most of the guys went over there and they could fly thirty or thirty-five missions. I've seen them flying four months and go home.

I was there over a year because they start looking at crews to make them lead crews. Of course the pilot is the first thing they look at. And a pilot that can fly good formation, chances are he's a good pilot. Well, flying formation for me was easy. I was a good formation pilot. And that was noticed. In other words, when they gave me a crew you kind of look them over. I'm no different than anybody else. I was looked over, too, and flying formation was like sitting down to eat to me. I had no problem. I could put my wing right in a guy's window and it didn't bother me. That was one thing that they looked at first, was the pilot. When we started being considered for lead crew, then they look at your bombardier and your navigator. Both of my guys were very good. The only thing wrong with being a lead crew is that you're over there longer. You don't fly.

As you get better or get more experience, they hold you back. Because we rotate. In other words, I was in the 68<sup>th</sup> Squadron, in the 44<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. We were all on one base. Then there were four or five groups that were called a wing. That was the 14<sup>th</sup> Wing. We were in the 14<sup>th</sup> Wing, 68<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 44<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. It was a kind of a chain that we went down. We would rotate. The more experience you got, they would rotate what crew would lead the group. Then which group would lead the wing. And then which wing would lead the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force... or, no, the division. I guess it was the division before that. But anyway, I've kind of forgotten the chain there. That kept rotating. The same crew didn't fly every day. They'd rotate. And the more experience you got the more they held you out for group lead.

**(1, B, 558)**

T: In a sense the better you were the longer you stayed?

M: Yes. That's right. That's the bad part. However, you get more rank. I made captain a lot quicker because I was the lead crew.

T: That's right. You were only in two and a half years and you were a captain.

M: Yes. I was a captain shortly after... I wasn't a first lieutenant very long. A couple things happened. The first time that they let me fly deputy lead--that meant that if the leader, if something happened to him, that I would take it over. This was sort of a milk run type mission. It was an ammunition dump in France. So I was going to be deputy lead of our squadron. Then there were three squadrons in the group that we flew. We were number three squadron over the target. We rotated that way. Sometimes one squadron would lead the group and then they'd rotate them. It was our squadron's turn to be number three that day. That's the day I flew lead for my first time. That was the reason they did it because the guy lost his engine. I was supposed to be deputy lead and he lost an engine on takeoff, so I took over the lead. I'd never flown deputy lead.

To make a long story short, we were bombing an ammunition dump in France. So we flew in three squadrons, a lead squadron and a squadron here and

here. Then when we get to the target area, we call that the initial point, we'd spread out and get in trail, one behind the other. One squadron, then another and we'd bomb. All three squadrons usually bombed the same target. I was the third squadron to go over the target and it was an ammunition dump. So we were on the bomb run and I asked the bombardier, "Are you picking up the target?" He said "Yes. I got it." So then he said, "There's something wrong." He said, "Those other two squadrons didn't drop their bombs." So I asked the radio operator, "Have you heard any recall?" "No," he said. "I haven't heard a thing. There hasn't been a thing on the keys." The bombardier said, "What do I do?" I said, "Drop them. That's what we came for." But we couldn't figure out what the other two... it was a beautiful day. It was clear as a bell.

T: So clouds weren't a problem.

M: No. No clouds. It was just a clear day. So we dropped the bombs and we hit it. So then the procedure was that the radio operator on the key would send in what happened. So he sent in his message that Number Three Squadron dropped the bombs and looked like it was good. But we couldn't figure out why those other two guys didn't drop them. They had to drop them in the North Sea when we came back. That's what you did. You didn't bring them back.

T: You didn't land with bombs.

M: You didn't land with bombs. You dropped them in the ocean is what you would do. So anyway, when we came back that day and I pulled up to my hard stand where I parked, here's the squadron commander and the base commander and it just happened that the wing commander happened to be on our base. He was a full general. He just happened to be there that day. They were all out there to meet me and I thought oh, boy! I wonder what I did here? What is wrong? Well, what they did, they were there to congratulate me. This was my first lead. That's the first time I led. I never flew another mission I didn't lead. I was the lead crew from then on. We did hit the target. What happened, the first guy couldn't find the target. He couldn't see it. And the second guy thought there must be some recall. There must be some reason because this real experienced crew didn't drop. So he didn't drop either. So, us greenhorns come through. We dropped and hit the target. That's what got me up. Got me started toward my captaincy right away. I never flew anything but lead after that.

T: In a sense it was chance, because of what they had not done ahead of you, and who was there when you got back.

M: Yes. That's right (*chuckles*).

T: When you first got together with your crew, to back up a little bit, did you have any input over the selection of that crew or were they picked for you?

M: No. They were picked for me.

T: So ten guys who were brought together for the first time. How did you jell with your crew?

M: Real well. Except for one person. My bombardier. He didn't jell with anybody. He was a very good bombardier. He was a smart kid but his personality was... I don't know. He didn't run around with us. He didn't hang around with us. He was off... In fact, our quarters where the combat crews officers did not... we weren't even in the same part of the base as the ground crew was. The ground personnel. Those officers had a different location. He used to go over and hang around with those guys instead of us half the time.

T: The ground crew. Were they enlisted?

M: The officers.

T: Ground crew officers.

M: Yes. Might be like the weatherman, intelligence, and some of those guys. He didn't associate. Like when we'd go on leave he wouldn't... we'd go to London together but we'd never see him again. He just didn't associate with us.

T: How do you explain that? Was it a personality thing or what?

M: I don't know. He was a good bombardier. Our social life just... we had none with him.

T: Was that a disruptive influence, Mel?

M: Not as far as our performance was concerned it wasn't. When we got in that airplane everybody had his job to do. And we didn't have any personal bickering back and forth. Anything like that. We never had any cross words with each other or anything like that. I was the commander of the crew, and he knew it and he... whatever I said was okay with him. When we were in the crew, when we were flying, he was okay, so I said, what he does on the ground I can put up with.

**(1, B, 635)**

T: Yes. I guess that's it. If he does his job then what can you say? Do you remember the first mission you flew when you got over to England?

M: The first mission I flew, I flew as copilot with an experienced crew. That was the procedure. When a new crew came in the first pilot flies copilot on a mission just to see how it goes. That saves a lot of explaining later. So my first mission was as copilot.

T: With a different crew?

M: With a different crew. To tell you the truth, I can't remember where we went now. But it didn't amount to anything. As far as the first mission that I flew with my crew, I don't remember which one it was now. I don't know where we went the first time.

T: You flew twenty-nine combat missions. Which one of those missions was most memorable for you and why?

M: The most memorable was when we went to Hamburg, Germany and got three hundred and seventeen holes in our plane. Got my rudder shot off.

T: So you couldn't control the plane.

M: I could, but it was... we had several things go wrong. A shell came up through and the cables for the tail controls go back up through the top of the plane inside. You can see them up there.

T: Manual cable. So wires.

M: Yes. The cables to the elevators. When we run a bomb run we turn the flight over to the bombardier bombsight. He punches a button and I punch a button and the bombsight has the control of the autopilot. So when he's looking at the bombsight and you control it and he's putting the crosshairs on the target and getting it set, if he turns a little this way, the plane turns. It's connected to the autopilot. On the planes when we first went over... that came after I got there. First we had what we call a PDI, pilot directional indicator, and it was a needle and it would go right or left, and then when he'd correct to the right I'd go to the right and center that needle. I'd keep that needle centered and then I was with the bombsight. They invented a thing that would hook to the autopilot and automatically do that. So that's what we were doing. So this particular mission was at Hamburg, Germany, and we were getting shot up pretty bad. In fact, everybody in the plane was injured in the tail. They were all injured. After we got over the target we turned the autopilot off and then I would re-trim the ship. I turned the autopilot off and took a hold of the wheel it wasn't hooked to anything.

T: Just loose?

M: Yes. Nothing. So I snapped the autopilot back on. The three guys in the tail were all injured.

T: That would be your tail gunner and your two waist gunners.

M: Yes. They were all injured. They had not noticed that this cable was shot in two. They were hanging down back there. As soon as I could get my flight engineer, once we got away from the target, he went back there and saw what had happened. We were flying on the autopilot because the servers for the autopilot are back in the tail. I had electrical connection with the tail but not my cables. So the autopilot, I could fly with autopilot. I don't know whether I could land with it or not. Anyway, he went back there and he told me those cables are all shot in two. He had a pair of pliers and he worked most of the time. Of course, I continued to fly in formation. I was the lead plane so I didn't have to fly formation. They were flying off of me. He cut a piece of the trim-tab cable out and he had a bunch of copper wire off of an ammunition box.

To make a long story short, he got that cable tied on there and wound it to where it was fairly tight. It took him quite a while to do it. And he only had a pair of pliers. And that airplane cable is... you can't hardly cut it with blowtorch. It's tough steel. It's really good stuff. He had a hard time getting a piece cut out but he made a splice. He said, "I got it wired together pretty good." I couldn't tell there was anything. He had it good and tight so that I could... When you land that thing, you really have to pull back hard. I mean hard.

T: You mentioned your butt came off the seat when you did that.

M: Right. It's hard. So you're pulling on that cable. So I had to make up my mind whether to try to land it on the autopilot.

T: As the lead plane.

**(1, B, 688)**

M: Yes. Of course, we make single landings. We peel off and land one at a time.

T: But if you crashed, you could block the runway, couldn't you?

M: Yes. I could. So I decided that it would hold and I would land it by hand rather than to try to do it on the autopilot. And I've got three wounded guys. I didn't want to take any more time. I wanted to get on the ground. I made a good landing. The thing held. I didn't even go back to my hard stand. I just turned off the runway and there was an ambulance sitting there and I just head over there. Of course they knew I had wounded aboard because... We had radio silence. I couldn't tell them by radio, but we had signals. We had a flare gun. We would shoot red flares out on the final approach. That means you have wounded aboard and the ambulance will meet you right there.

T: So the color of the flare told them that.

M: Yes. We had some signals like that. I can't remember what some of the others were. But red flare was "wounded aboard."

T: How badly were your crew members wounded?

M: He was put in the hospital for a few days and he was back out. It was just kind of a flesh wound was what it was. It healed up pretty fast.

T: Did you ever lose any crew members because they were wounded?

M: No.

T: So you were fortunate there too.

M: Yes. I think four guys got Purple Hearts. That means they got wounded at some time. I think there were four, maybe five of them. Most of them were in the back of the plane.

T: That was tough duty back there as a gunner, wasn't it?

M: They didn't have the protection that we had up in the front. We had the engines on each side of us and then right outside my window there was a sheet of steel on the outside of the plane and the same on the copilot. Then they had one under the... of course it could damage the plane, but it wouldn't hit us. Like one bullet come through there or something.

T: But it could in the back of the plane. They just didn't have...

M: They didn't have the protection back there. They all wore flak suits. We all wore flak suits.

T: Was your plane pressurized.

M: No. No. No.

T: So you had to use oxygen at altitude and it was cold, wasn't it?

M: Oh, yes.

T: How cold would it get up there?

M: Thirty, forty below outdoors. But we wore electric suits.

T: Did you have those the whole time you were there?

M: Yes.

T: Were those like little electric cables almost in your...

M: Yes. They ran cables through. You could feel them. When it got really cold you could tell where the thing was. But they were quite comfortable. And gloves too. Electric gloves.

T: Did it work?

M: Yes.

T: Otherwise it would have been unbearably cold, wouldn't it? You wouldn't have been able to...

M: Oh, yes. Sixty below zero. That's cold. In fact, we had trouble... you know the oil in our propellers, that's how we changed the pitch. And if you flew too long without changing the pitch, it would congeal. The guys who were flying formation, flying off of the leader, they were changing their power all the time. Jockeying when they're flying formation with the lead plane, and that's what I'm flying. It's on autopilot, and you cruise along and you don't change the pitch. It has more of a chance to congeal than it does if you're flying on the wing.

T: You took a number of hits from flak damage that time. Was that commonly a problem on bombing runs, flak?

M: Yes.

T: When you're on a bomb run or you're over a target, you know the flak is out there and it could hit your plane, what does that do to you? Mentally, how do you process that while you're going over there?

M: You kind of get used to it.

T: Really?

M: When I say you get used to it, you get used to putting up with it. It would be a court martial offense to turn off the bomb run because of flak. They'd court martial you.

T: You held on target.

M: Yes. They'd court martial you if you didn't. In other words, if you got hit, you got hit. That was the chance you take. Earlier on they did what they called evasive action when you were on a bomb run. They'd fly S-turns and stuff. They were missing too many of the targets, so General LeMay said it was a court martial offense to take evasive action; you'd get court martialed if you did. It gets heavy, you just grit your teeth and...

T: How hard was it to grit your teeth and keep going?

M: That's all you do.

T: Was that hard to do?

M: You knew you couldn't turn. The whole thing is no fun. The whole thing is dangerous. They overload you for takeoff. You wonder if you're going to get off. You're taking off in the dark. It's just a dangerous situation to be in (*laughs*).

T: How much of a problem were German fighter aircraft?

M: They were not near the problem to us that the flak was. Flak was our biggest problem.

T: Is that right?

M: Yes. Because we had fighter protection. P-51s were right along with us. They wouldn't go to the target with us but they were keeping us in sight at all times. We flew in a trail. We'd bunch up. Everything was timed so that all one thousand airplanes would be going in the same direction until they got over there. Then you'd branch out. Then you'd come back the same way. We'd all get together and come back the same course. So the fighters didn't have such a big area to cover.

T: So it was very well choreographed in a sense.

M: You bet.

T: Where you had to be and when.

M: You bet.

T: So you're saying flak was the problem much more so than German aircraft?

M: Yes.

T: You spent a lot of time out of the air, too. On the ground. I'm wondering how you passed your time when you were not in the airplane?

M: It got so that I was the flight commander, so we were routing new crews in and I'd go out and fly with new crews. Around the base. Show them how you do this and how you do that. Pretty much kept busy doing things like that. Then we went out and practiced dropping bombs. We'd go out and train, even with twenty missions under our belt. We'd still go out and practice dropping bombs.

T: So you could take your plane up and go practice.

M: Oh, yes.

T: You'd think after so many missions you'd have it down pat.

M: Yes.

T: When you went out to practice, what was it you were trying to improve?

M: Just like practice shooting a gun or anything else. It gives the bombardier practice doing it. There was more for the bombardier than there was for us.

T: How often did you get off of base into Norwich or London for example?

M: About once a month.

T: Where did you go most frequently? Was it Norwich?

M: We could go to Norwich at noon and come back that night. They had a truck that would take you. But if we went to London we'd go on the train. That would usually be a three day. We'd take a day to get down there and we'd stay that night and another night. We'd stay two nights and then come back the next day. We'd go to London and we did a lot of sightseeing. They had a lot of theaters going then. We'd go to shows and stuff like that. Then this sightseeing. When you've never been to England before there's a lot of sightseeing you can do. Particularly around London. It's a big place.

T: It really is. How much contact did you have with the local civilian population?

M: None practically.

T: Really?

M: Yes.

T: Could you go to restaurants or pubs and sort of be around other people? Be around British people that way?

M: Oh, yes. Or if you took a taxi or something like that...

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

T: Was it easy to strike up a conversation with people in England?

M: Oh, yes. The English people were very friendly with us. I found them to be. Some of our guys mistreated them some, too. For the most part we got along fine or at least I did. I never saw any... most of the English people were friendly to me.

T: Was that friendly in a more general passing, "Hi, how are you doing?" sense, or more that you could sit down and actually talk with them for more than a few minutes?

M: I don't know that I ever really ever had an opportunity to sit down and talk with them. But like on the bus or on the train sometimes, you'd get to be with them and visit with them or something like that. But I didn't really have much to do with them. They were jealous. We lived so much better than they did. We had some idiots over there too, that didn't do our reputation any good.

T: What do you mean by that?

M: Guys would go out and get drunk and make a fool of themselves in London or something like that.

T: Because they're American, people make associations.

M: Yes. We had a lot more money than they did. They didn't have any money. To see us live the way we did sometimes, why that bothered them too.

T: I want to switch a little bit here and ask about some other things. Did you come into contact with blacks at all when you were in the military? And the reason I ask is, we're asking about people's experiences with different ethnic groups in the military.

M: We had one black navigator in our squadron. We went out of our way... of course we had quite a few southern guys, and they had a little harder time with it, but us northern guys went out of our way to make that fellow feel comfortable. Now some of the crews would have resented having a black navigator. I don't know this to be true, but I suspect that before they put him on the particular crew that they did, that they talked to the pilot to see if it would be a problem. I happened to know him real well. I'm sure that he assured them that his crew would... and they did. They treated him like... they probably went out of their way to be nice to him. And we all did. But you know, some of the southern people, it was hard for them. They just weren't used to associating with black people. It was hard for them.

T: Being from Iowa that wasn't a problem for you.

M: No. And my navigator and copilot. We were all from the north. My enlisted crew... I didn't have any southerners on my enlisted guys either. We were all from California or someplace else.

T: That would have worked perhaps with your crew as well.

M: It would have worked on our crew for sure. Yes, for sure my crew would have. They had a couple guys from the south, but they would not have been a problem. But that's been quite a long time ago, and the black people have made strides in getting accepted.

T: In fact, it's such a different world for many young readers and young listeners of this, we feel it important to let them know that things weren't always the way they are now. And that's why we ask for people's observations.

**(2, A, 72)**

M: This one black navigator we had, I think most of us went out of our way to treat him well. We had some admiration for the guy that he made it to where he did. The crew that he was on treated him... he was just one of the guys.

T: Were there blacks among the ground crew, or the truck drivers, or other enlisted people that you saw?

M: If there were I don't remember them. I don't remember them as being black. There might have been some, but I don't remember that there were.

T: Did you come into contact with women in uniform? Red Cross workers, nurses, this type of thing?

M: Very seldom. Very seldom.

T: And you were never hospitalized were you, when you were in the service?

M: Overnight one time. I went up there for some reason and they kept me overnight at the base hospital. I forget why now. It was something. I had a cold or something. We didn't have any nurses there. We had... We called them flight surgeons, is what we called them. They were doctors. But in our outfit they were called flight surgeons and I got acquainted real well with a couple of them. I think I did get a cold one time, but for the most part I didn't have any health problems.

T: Also on the question of social issues, was there a certain amount of stress for you, personally, associated with worrying about the next mission?

M: I suppose there was but we weren't aware of it. We lived with it every day. Somebody flew every day. We flew every day. There were no days off. So there's guys coming back every day from a mission. Now if the weather was bad, we didn't, but the weather was the only reason. If the weather was good, we went someplace. I don't think it was any problem.

T: So you were not a person, I hear you saying, that worried so much about what's going to happen next time? Is it going to be a tough mission, this kind of thing? You didn't do that?

M: You kind of get acclimated to where you are. I think it's kind of like driving in bad traffic. You kind of get used to it. You get through it, but you know you're going to have to do it. So you do the best you can and not worry about it too much, because we saw it happen so many times. That bunk's empty tonight. Those guys didn't come back. You gotta think about that. And it happened a lot.

**(2, A, 120)**

T: Is that depressing to watch bunks empty out like that?

M: If they don't come home that night somebody's in there cleaning his stuff up because they don't want the stuff stolen. So they had a fellow that came around, usually an enlisted man, with a box, and he would put all the guy's stuff in it. So it wouldn't be in the barracks. None of us would steal from each other.

T: But somebody might.

M: I never heard of that. Just to make sure, because if we happen to have flown that day and somebody didn't come back and we knew about it, we'd have some idea about how serious it was. One time I couldn't get back in because of the weather. We had to go up to English base and stay all night. I had to take the whole squadron up there. We went to a fighter base. They told us to go up to this fighter, British fighter base school, and it was not a big outfit. Here we come in with ten men in each airplane. They didn't have... it was a fighter type thing, so they only had one pilot for every airplane. We had them so outnumbered that we used up all their rations. In fact, I got pretty well acquainted with the base commander. I happened to be in charge because I was the lead crew. So I was pretty much responsible for our guys. So I stayed in the base commander's quarters. British guy. But they couldn't help but be somewhat jealous. We were so much better off than they were.

T: Did they notice that?

M: Oh, sure.

T: Did you notice it too?

M: You couldn't hardly help but notice it. Yes.

T: When you were off duty, as you looked around, the people you dealt with, a lot of people at that base, how much of a problem was alcohol consumption?

M: For our people it wasn't a problem. Once in a while a guy would get drunk. For the most part, most of us, had never been overseas before and we'd go to London. We were busy sightseeing. I don't know, I suppose that there were nightclubs and things that were still going but not like they are now. The economy was... they were just fighting to have three meals a day over there. They didn't have the good times to celebrate. Everything was scarce.

T: How about on the base? Was alcohol available?

M: We didn't get a ration. We had an officer's club and you could go over there and have a drink if you wanted it, and pay for it. You were not issued any booze or entitled to any. If you got any liquor, you'd have to go someplace and buy it. The military wasn't responsible for it.

T: The officer's club was open for all officers, right?

M: Yes. You could go over there and get a drink if you wanted it.

T: Did they watch how much people drank to make sure that...

M: No.

T: You were on your own.

M: Yes. I didn't drink so it wasn't a problem for me.

T: Not for you, but as you observed lots of other people, were you ever worried about someone in your crew having had too much to drink before a mission?

M: No.

T: Lucky for you I guess.

M: We usually knew the night before that we were going to fly the next day. So nobody would drink. There wasn't a tavern on every corner on the airbase. There was nothing around to drink. Drinking was not a problem. At our place it wasn't anyhow.

T: Did you fly your twenty-nine missions with the same ten people?

M: Mostly. Once in a while if somebody was sick I'd have a substitute. The first mission, I flew as copilot for another crew.

T: Right, but the missions you flew with your crew you didn't have replacements to your crew or anything like that.

M: Not unless they were sick or something like that. I think I had a full crew every time I flew. My crew was there.

T: How did you stay in touch with your wife and other family back home?

M: By mail. That's about the only way. If you got a letter within a week, that was really good. You'd know that it was going. That's the same way [Aileen] would hear from me. She'd know I was alive a week ago, but whether I was today or not, she'd never know.

T: Were you a regular letter writer?

M: I wrote every day.

T: Did you write every day?

M: I wrote every day that I could.

T: What kind of things did you put in letters?

M: Pretty much what we were doing. What we did that day. I'd have to ask her.

T: More of daily routine.

M: Yes.

T: And you had to censor what you wrote at some point, didn't you?

M: Oh, yes. We couldn't say we were going to bomb Berlin tomorrow or something like that. No. We could tell them what we did and things like that. Went to town and went and saw a movie. Something like that. We had a special dinner at the officer's club. Something like that.

T: Did your wife know where you were in England?

M: No. I don't think she knew exactly where I was.

T: She knew you were in England though.

M: Yes. Somewhere in England. That's all we could put.

T: Did you write to anybody else when you were overseas?

M: I think I wrote to my sister probably. Once in a while I might have sent a letter back to where I worked. I think I might have. I wrote to her every day. I mean if I

was there. Sometimes we'd get weathered out or something and I wouldn't. And she wrote to me every day. So we had mail every day.

T: You were away for about a year, and in the States you were away for months at a time. Did you begin to, in a sense, pull away from your family life? From your wife and your child, and get caught up in what you were doing because you didn't have any contact? Or were you very much aware of that on a daily basis?

M: No. I was pretty much aware of what was going on because she wrote to me every day, and I wrote to her every day. Of course, I couldn't tell her what I did every day. Things that I could tell her I did. And she wrote to me and she could tell me just about everything. She'd send me pictures. See we had a little one. When I left we had an eleven month old baby. I was home for his first birthday and I was home for was his fourth birthday (*laughs*).

T: You missed one, two and three?

M: I just missed his first one.

T: How did you deal with that?

M: I was one of a million guys that were doing it. We were going through the same thing.

**(2, A, 221)**

T: Yes, but your kid was the only one missing his...?

M: Yes. Yes.

T: Did that bother you, Mel?

M: Oh, sure. Sure it did. But that's the way life was.

T: Did it make it easier knowing that you weren't the only person going through that?

M: I suppose. Misery loves company. I suppose. We'd cry on each others' shoulders and tell our troubles to each other. Of course our crew got to be... we were like brothers. Particularly my copilot and I. We were very close.

T: Do experiences like combat missions over Germany help to build close relationships with people?

M: I suppose it does. But now you see we trained together here in the States. We flew a new airplane over there together and then we went through indoctrination

over there together. So we were pretty much of a team. Pretty close. We had four officers and six enlisted men. All the enlisted men called me by my first name when we were together. But any other times it would be Captain Boggs. If anybody else was around. But when we were together alone, we were on a first name basis. They called me Roy.

T: And the same for you with them?

M: Yes. I always called them by their first name anyhow. Officers could do that. I don't know whether the other crews did that or not. I suspect they did. Because most of the guys that I knew that were pilots were pretty ordinary guys. I think maybe in the Air Force, some of the Air Force, some of the other military thought the Air Force were a bunch of snobs or something, but they weren't. They were pretty... there was a jerk here and there in whatever you get into, but for most of the guys, every crew thought his pilot was the best pilot on the base. Every crew thought that.

T: You mentioned about being average guys. Let's face it, without the war, you were a plumber and probably would never have flown an airplane.

M: That's right (*laughs*). I'd never been up in an airplane.

T: That's right. The confession that came out, right?  
You got pretty close with your crew, these ten guys.

M: See the officers lived in one quarters and enlisted me in another quarters. Now like the enlisted men, when they wrote a letter home, it had to be censored.

T: By officers.

M: Officers. Officers didn't have to. You could write anything. You were supposed to know better. But the enlisted men would bring, supposedly, their letter over for you to read to make sure it didn't have anything in it. We never read their letters. We told them you know what you can say and what can't. You just bring me your envelope and I'll initial it. And all of them, the four officers on our crew, we did that. We didn't read their mail.

T: Although you were supposed to be reading it.

M: Yep. We were certifying that it was okay, but like I told them: You know what you can say and what you can't say. And I'm sure they never let me down. I had guys with college degrees. These guys, some of them were educated. High school graduate is what I was. I had some pretty high-class guys. A couple of them had washed out of pilot school. They became gunners.

T: Of the ten members of your crew, how many did you stay in touch with after the service?

M: About four. Four to five. Four.

T: What about the other ones?

M: My bombardier I never heard from. Never did hear from him. But he wasn't one of us anyway. He was in a world of his own. Like I say, he was a good bombardier. Did his job when he was with me. So we kept him and he flew home with us. We flew a plane home when the war was over. He came home with us and I haven't seen him since. Or heard from him.

T: How have you stayed in touch with people over the years?

M: I guess like my copilot and navigator. I've been staying in touch with those guys pretty much.

T: Ever since the war ended?

M: And then there's two or three of that I've never heard from. I don't know where they are.

T: Is it that you tried and they didn't reciprocate or...?

M: No. I just didn't know where to get in touch with them and they apparently didn't know where to get in touch with me. That's the only thing I can see. But my copilot and I were very close. In fact, he came out to Iowa to spend some time with me a couple of times. And my navigator, I wrote to him all the time. He just died a couple years ago. Bombardier, he was an oddball. I never did hear from him.

T: Now when you saw people after the war, you mentioned you saw people a couple times, what did you talk about?

M: We talked some about the war, like things that happened. Then also about what's going on now.

T: So a little of now and then.

M: Yes.

T: Have you had unit reunions?

M: Yes. I've been to one or two.

T: Is that an 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force reunion, or a bomb group? How do they do those?

M: I think it was the group reunion.

T: So it was a lot of people getting together.

M: Well, compared to how many were in the place and what showed up, not too many and most of them were officers. Just the officers. I don't know. I sort of lost interest in it. I didn't have anything in common with them much. I didn't have that much to do with them. The guys that were on my crew were the only ones that I was close to.

T: That was the bond you made.

M: Now our squadron commander, I did see him once or twice. But I wasn't that close to him either. He was a real nice guy. Real religious guy.

T: Were you a religious person at this time?

M: Oh, yes. I've always been a Christian.

T: How did you find your faith tested by your experiences?

M: I prayed every day (*laughs*). We prayed; made no bones about it. The first thing in the briefing. We wouldn't go on a mission if the chaplain didn't come in and offer a prayer. That was the first thing at briefings was the chaplain came. Every mission. We had a prayer before the mission.

T: What kind of words could, or did, the chaplain offer before a mission?

M: Just pretty much in general. Asking for protection. Praying for our families. Praying for our safety. And thanking that we're still here. That sort of thing.

T: If I can ask, you dropped different types of bomb loads over Germany. At times over cities or civilian targets. Did you ever drop incendiary bombs?

M: Oh, yes.

T: Was that tough to square what you were doing with the message you were getting from the chaplain?

M: No. Yes. I mean it was all part of the program. Nobody was happy to go out and kill people. Nobody was happy about having them come killing us. It didn't seem like religion entered into the program of what we did. We all knew it was wrong to go bomb a city and kill a bunch of people the same was it was that they came over and bomb us and kill us. The whole thing in war, there's nothing right about it. They don't make sense. I guess our prayers were pretty much for our own survival. The first thing at briefing. If you'd asked the guys, Christians or non-Christians, whatever they were, what was the most important part of that briefing, it was

having that chaplain there. They believed that and they wanted... they would have felt deprived if the chaplain hadn't been there. But he always was.

T: How did that help you personally?

M: When you do something, you want to do it the best you can. Do everything that you can. Live the best life that you can. I guess you feel that this is a part of doing what you should do or what should be done. We weren't a bunch of warriors. We weren't interested in killing German women and children. That isn't what we thought about. When we bombed a target it was always an industrial factory. Of course, people are down in that factory probably. Probably they got out of it when they knew we were coming. I guess you can't let those kind of things worry you.

T: Are you saying you kept it abstract? That you were bombing the factory and not what was inside?

**(2, A, 333)**

M: When I first went into the service, we had a tough old officer there when we started our Basic Training. Before we even got near an airplane, he said in no uncertain terms, "You're here for one thing, to learn to kill." That's what he told us. "You're here to learn to kill." That kind of shook us up.

T: I bet. That peeled away a lot of that abstract sense didn't it?

M: Yes. And that's what it was about. I guess when we'd go to bomb an airfield or something we don't think we're bombing the people so much. And we're not. We're more interested in blowing up their airplanes than we are the people. If we had a choice, I think the United States, once they entered in, would have bombed places that didn't have people in it if they could have. But that isn't the way war is. Every day they're lobbing those bombs over onto London, into England. Those silent bombs.

T: The V-1s. Yes. The V-2s.

M: We had those buzz bombs come up over our field a lot. We saw a lot of those. None of them landed on our field but a lot of times they would land within a distance we could hear it go off. Where I was there were a lot of air bases. It was a flat area and there...

T: It's the easternmost part of England as well, so it's close to the continent.

M: Yes. Sixteen miles from Norwich. And it's really flat out there and they had lots and lots of airfields. Both British and American. So they'd send those buzz bombs over there. Sometimes they would hit a runway. Sometimes they would hit a barracks. You never knew when one of them was going to get you.

T: Did you ever come under fire or attack from German planes when you were over there?

M: Oh, yes.

T: Did you? At your base?

M: Oh, at the base. No. They never strafed. They strafed the runway. For some reason or other they didn't think it was worth... there wasn't any row of barracks. They were all scattered. There was one here and one here. It was scattered all over. So it would be pretty hard to get very many at a time. But they would strafe the planes because they were all sitting outdoors on the runway. That's what they'd strafe. They wouldn't strafe the living quarters.

T: Did you ever have a close call with a strafing attack when you were at the base?

M: No. No, I didn't. I'd been there when they strafed the runway but we were, I don't know, I suppose our barracks was a half mile from the runway.

T: So this was a big base you were at.

M: Oh, yes.

T: My gosh, if you were a half mile from the runway. Wow!

You were in Europe when President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945. I'm wondering if you recall how you reacted when you heard that the President had died.

M: No, I don't. I don't remember.

T: Less than a month later the war against Germany ended in May of 1945. How did you and those in your crew for example react to that news?

M: We were all pretty pleased. That's for sure.

T: If you were to put it on a scale, were you closer to relief or elation?

M: I think elation. You kind of got used to it. Like I say, I flew twenty-nine missions and I would have had to fly one more and I would have been through. Most of the crews had to fly thirty-five. If you were lead crew you only had to fly thirty.

T: So you were one shy. Only one shy.

M: Yes. And the reason for that was it took us longer. We were there longer. I saw guys come over there in ninety days fly their missions and go home. I was there for a year.

T: Because you were lead plane you had to wait longer for your opportunities to fly.

M: Yes. I was flying every day and I was training new guys and checking out. We'd get new crews in and I'd fly with them.

T: Just not combat missions though.

M: Yes.

T: Did the missions get easier as the war wound down?

M: No. I don't think so. You say get easier. Yes, we had less ground fire. Yes. We did have. And we were running out of targets. In fact, I only remember... it was the last mission I flew. I didn't know it was my last one, but the war ended and our target was a headquarters for an intelligence group of Germans right south of Berlin. We were to bomb that.

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.**

M: Just fly over Berlin and string your bombs out. It was just south of Berlin. It was a clear day and we bombed the target.

T: That was your twenty-ninth mission?

M: The twenty-ninth mission. I had one more to go. I had to fly thirty and I would have been through.

T: Thirty missions meant that you would not have been designated for reassignment to the Pacific.

M: Oh, yes.

T: You could have been?

M: Well, reassignment to something.

T: But you have perhaps had more combat missions in the Pacific?

M: Probably not. I probably would have gone home as an instructor, something like that. Probably by an instructor. What better instructor can you get than a guy that just finished his tour of duty?

T: No kidding.

M: Yes.

T: When you went back to the States in June of 1945 you did ultimately become a B-29 instructor? Or you were scheduled to be?

M: Yes. I was scheduled to be.

T: So you never actually took that job on.

M: I got to the base. I never got inside of a B-29. Never got inside.

T: Is that right? And then the war in the Pacific ended, and that was just cut like a hot potato.

M: Yes. It was over then. In fact, for some reason they weren't rushing to get us checked out in B-29s. In fact, in order to get flight pay we had to fly, I think you had to fly, four hours a month. I needed four hours in because I'd been on leave and went back there. I went down to operations. I hadn't been assigned to do anything and I said I need to get some time in. So I flew as copilot for some guy in a C-47 and went down into Texas to pick up some supplies and back so I got my four hours in.

T: You got your hours that way. Was there a celebration at Shipton when the war against Germany ended?

M: Yes.

T: Can you talk about that?

M: When you say a celebration, there was no parades or anything like that.

T: Impromptu parties?

M: Not on our base. The biggest thing that I remember that we did was that we took ground personnel for an airplane ride over Germany and showed them.

T: After things were over.

M: Yes.

T: They'd never seen anything.

M: Oh, no. They never flew. I did that two different days. I took a planeload of guys. These are non-flying guys, mechanics and intelligence officers.

T: Just in the back of the plane or what?

M: Yes. They just stood around in the plane. Of course it was a bomber. We didn't have seats and stuff.

T: That's right.

M: We had seats for the crew. They would just stand up or they could sit on the floor and look out.

T: As long as you don't go too high altitude it wouldn't get too cold, right.

M: It was in the summer anyway. We didn't go up very high.

T: Were those sanctioned missions or were those under the table?

M: Well, no. We had the blessing of our commanding officer anyhow. Everybody was doing it. See, they wanted... they have all those people there. What do you do with them? Stand around with their finger in their nose all day or something? They wanted to give us something to do. And as fast as they could they were getting organized to get us to go home. Let us go home or get us reassigned to do something.

T: It didn't take long for you to leave.

M: No.

T: June you did go back to the States.

M: Well, fortunately I got to fly a plane home.

T: Was it war weary, one of those planes, or was it your own plane?

M: It was still one that was on the line to be used. In fact all the planes we had on the line were flyable. We had good maintenance. The guys took good care of them. My crew of ten plus another ten. There were twenty of us on it.

T: In that plane?

M: In that plane. Yes. To come home.

T: All the way back to the States?

M: Yes.

T: Where did you sit?

M: Well, we had the blankets that they put back there and we didn't go to high altitude. It was summertime. In June. But we went up through Iceland and Greenland and landed. So those guys got to see that. We stayed overnight. Then we came on down into the States. I forget where we landed now. Someplace in Cincinnati I believe. Then from there we all went our ways.

T: Was that the last time you flew a B-24?

M: That was the last time. Flew one home and that was the last time.

T: When was the first time after you got home that you saw Aileen and your son?

M: I went right directly as soon as I could. I got on a train. I came home on a train. To Des Moines.

T: Was she at the station to meet you there or not?

M: I don't think so because I don't think she knew when I was coming in. I didn't know. The trains were so crazy. I think I probably called when I got in. I think I came home on the streetcar. Maybe she'd remember.

T: You had some leave there before you had to report to York, Nebraska, is that right?

M: Yes. I think I had thirty days.

T: Is it possible in thirty days to catch up on everything? I mean your son is how old now? Three?

M: No, but the good part about it was that I could take them with me. As soon as I got out there and found a place I could have...

T: In York, Nebraska?

M: Yes.

T: That was nice.

M: I could have them come out.

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M: That's what I did. As soon as I got a place they came out. So they were with me until I got separated.

T: And you were separated then in November.

M: I think that was... I had a lot of leave coming.

T: Terminal leave you had.

M: I think my leave was up then, but I was home. I wasn't that long getting home.

T: You didn't spend that much time in York, Nebraska, then, did you?

M: No.

T: When you got home and out of the service, what was your initial reaction to being out of the military?

M: Happy to be out of it. Happy the war was over. One of those things that was behind you. And of course, I was just one of thousands of guys coming home. There were a lot of us all in the same boat. We just had to start over again. I went back to work for the same company that I'd left.

T: So in a sense you stepped out for a few years and stepped back.

M: Yes. It was a small company.

T: How much had your job changed, or the workplace changed in the couple years that you were gone?

M: Not much. I went right back to work. It was starting to get better because during the war materials were so hard. It had to be almost a military type job to get parts. You get repair parts but there was very little new construction. But as soon as the war was over, everybody was wanting to get started on some new construction. But still there was a shortage of materials because the factories had been making bullets and planes and stuff like that. All those factories that made plumbing fixtures and parts and boilers and things like that had to get retooled.

T: Were you able to go back working fulltime right away?

M: Yes.

T: Was there overtime as well?

M: Yes. There was.

T: So there was plenty of work.

M: Yes.

T: Did you take any time off between when you were discharged and when you went back to work?

M: I probably did, but I don't remember how much. Not much.

T: So if it was any, you took a little bit but then went back to work.

M: Aileen might remember but I don't remember. I had some leave coming but that meant that I just got paid for it.

T: So you were still officially on the military payroll even though they were long done with you.

M: Yes. I didn't have to go back anymore.

T: What do you think was the hardest thing for you readjusting to life out of the military, life back with your family, being a plumber again? In a sense, your life changed once drastically to go away, and then, in a sense, changed equally drastically to come back.

M: But I'd done this before. I was coming back home. And I was used to doing those things. I was used to being with those people. And I was used to being in that house. So it was coming home. It was not hard to get used to.

T: So it sounds like a bigger transition going away to the service than coming back.

M: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Coming home was no problem (*chuckles*).

T: Were you, Mel, then or in the years after the service one of those who were bothered by bad dreams or recurring images from the war?

M: Like bad dreams?

T: Yes. Did things come up in dreams that you remembered a mission or a person or something that happened to you?

M: No. Not that I remember. I was pretty much my old self again when I came home. I don't think I changed much.

T: Did you notice a change in your wife when you came home?

M: Not really. The biggest change was in our little boy. He was an infant when I left and he was a little boy walking around now. That was a big change. We wrote to each other every day so we kept up on things. Of course, I'd get pictures of Steve.

No, coming home was no problem. In fact, I went back to work for the same company.

T: How much did you and Aileen talk about your wartime experiences?

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M: Not much.

T: Was that more a case of she didn't ask or you didn't tell?

M: She knew, first of all, you know, read a letter every day.

T: And yours were not censored.

M: No. But of course I didn't say anything that I wasn't supposed to say. But we were in contact and so she heard from me. She got a letter every day or maybe go three days and then get three letters too sometimes. That's the way it was overseas. We knew pretty much what was going on with the family and any new word that Steve had said or anything new that he'd done I'd hear about it.

T: She kept you up to date I guess as much as she possibly could.

M: We got acquainted with a couple when I was going through pilot training from Iowa. And she got acquainted with Ginger, and Ginger came and lived with her. Her husband was a pilot. He and I went through pilot training together. But he was a B-26 pilot so we didn't see each other after we got through pilot school. But we both went overseas at the same time and we both came home at the same time. He was in France and I was in England. I never saw him, but Ginger stayed with Aileen and Steve.

T: So that made it perhaps easier for everyone involved.

M: Yes.

T: That's very convenient. How soon after the war was it that you bought your first car?

M: I don't remember. I can't remember we had a car. I didn't need a car right away because I went to work for the plumbing company and they let me drive the truck back and forth.

T: You had the truck again after the war.

M: Yes.

T: You mentioned you had it before you left.

M: Yes.

T: You got lucky twice.

M: Yes. So going back and forth to work we didn't a car. Aileen had a car while I was gone. I don't think she drove it much but she had a car.

T: What else did you notice when you came back and were out of the service and were a civilian again? What other things did you notice were not easy to get? Products that you might have wanted or had money for that you just couldn't find or couldn't find easily.

M: Practically all products were... they hadn't made any new cars. There were no cars on the market. They started making those again. We were pretty well established in housekeeping so we really didn't need a new washing machine or anything like that.

T: You had a house before you left. That's right.

M: We had bought a home. We had a home.

T: So you weren't trying to find a place to live in a tight housing market or anything.

M: Oh, no. Aileen lived in the house. She and Ginger lived there until I came home. And we continued to live there.

T: Did you live there until you went to Iowa City?

M: Oh, no. We bought a new home shortly after that in the same neighborhood. There was a new addition to our neighborhood and some new homes. We bought a new home, a bigger house, because by this time we had the two kids. A boy and a girl.

T: When was your daughter born? After you got back from the service?

M: Yes. Steve was born in '42 so she was born in '46.

T: So pretty soon after you got home.

M: Yes.

T: I mentioned when we started everyone gets a chance to be a five minute philosopher. This is your chance here. At the time, when you were in the service,

when you were overseas, what did the war mean for you personally? What was it all about?

M: I guess we thought we were getting rid of the bad guys. The type of life that Hitler was proclaiming was not what we wanted. We were very much against what he was doing and the way he was persecuting the Jewish people. We looked at it as an Evil Empire.

T: In a sense, I hear you saying you were part of a crusade to put the world right.

M: Yes. For our own good. Yes. Because it was either them or us. That's what it was. If Hitler could have taken our country he sure would have.

T: When you were in the States in pilot training, did you have a preference about fighting the Japanese or fighting the Germans, or was it all the same to you?

M: No. At that time it didn't enter my head. What decision, and I did have some choice, was what kind of plane I wanted to fly after I finished cadets. I chose multi-engine. In most cases, if they could, they went by what you asked for. So I was wanting to fly the bigger airplanes. I don't know if it was for the camaraderie of the crew or what. But I'm glad I did. Because I've flown a lot of small airplanes since. It was kind of nice to have a crew.

T: They don't land heavy bombers on aircraft carriers on the water either.

M: No. There were twin engine bombers. My good friend and his wife stayed with Aileen while we were overseas, he chose B-26s. They were the twin engine. He was stationed in France. He did the same thing I did except we bombed bigger targets and we went farther. Our missions were longer. He got shot at just as much as we did.

T: He came back okay too?

M: Yes.

T: Final question. Mel, what do you think is the most important way that the war changed your life?

M: I'm not sure it changed it much. I went back to doing the same thing I was when I left. I think it might have opened some doors for me, having had that experience. I got a chance for a better job. After the war I was working for this company and a fellow called me up. He had done some research and he'd been in the Navy. He'd been a Naval officer and he was an engineer. He had an engineering degree and he was in heating and air conditioning business. He wanted to get in the plumbing business, but didn't know anything about it and didn't have a license, and somebody told him about me. So he called me up one day and just told me what I told you. He

said he wanted to get in the plumbing business and he said you've been recommended that you could do this. So I said I'm interested. So he came over to the house one Sunday afternoon and I went to work for him. He was in the air conditioning business but he wanted to get into the plumbing and he wanted some leadership in the plumbing department. So I went to work for him and I worked for him until I went into business for myself. In fact, when I left, I was manager of the company.

T: And you think those doors were opened to you because of your wartime experience. The fact that you had shown leadership skills.

M: No, I don't think so. But after I went to work for him, we did work around the Midwest. We even did some work up here in the Twin Cities. He bought me an airplane. He was interested in learning to fly too. He never did. Well, I think he finally did solo. But he drank so much that he didn't trust himself. Anyway over the years we had three or four airplanes. He'd go buy them. He didn't even talk to me. In fact, he called me up one day and said I just bought a new twin engine Piper Comanche.

T: You think this connection, this relationship had some link to your wartime experience?

M: Some probably. But also he checked out my working. He checked where I worked before. And he talked to other people about me. I was known somewhat better than maybe the average plumber. That was because I was some officer in the union, not much of an officer. I forget what I was now, but I was something where a lot of the people knew who I was. Also I had worked as a foreman superintendent on some big jobs and I got acquainted with a lot of people that knew me that I didn't know them. People knew me and he had people to go to for the references.

T: This just occurred to me when you were talking... Was it hard to go from being a captain of a bomber crew back to being a plumber and employee of a company?

M: No.

T: In a sense you were the guy in charge of a machine and ten people, and now you're a plumber.

M: Yes. But I wasn't being shot at every day either.

T: Nobody shoots at you when you're under the sink, do they?

M: No. In fact, a lot of the guys were interested in being an airline pilot then because...

T: Were you?

M: No. Because I already knew airline pilots were gone all the time. I didn't want a job where I was gone all the time. I wouldn't have taken an airline job if they'd offered it to me.

T: And a lot of guys were after those.

M: Oh, yes. Just for the sake of flying.

T: Sounds like you're pretty happy with the way your life turned out after the war.

M: Oh, absolutely. I never had it so good. I've really been lucky. I went into business for myself and was very successful. I have a good family. I have no complaints.

T: Is there anything you want to add before we conclude, Mel?

M: I've enjoyed doing this. It kinds brings back some memories that I don't think about... almost forgotten about.

T: A long time ago. Well, on the record, once again I want to thank you very much for taking time this evening to speak with me. I enjoyed this very much.

M: You're sure welcome.

**END OF INTERVIEW**