ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:

VETERANS OF THE AIR WAR OVER EUROPE IN WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW OF A TAIL GUNNER ON A B-17 "FLYING FORTRESS" HEAVY BOMBER WHO FLEW 11 COMBAT MISSIONS BEFORE BEING BADLY WOUNDED ON HIS FINAL MISSION – CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF SIUE COURSE HIST 447 "APPROACHES TO ORAL HISTORY"

NARRATOR: CHARLES A. (ALBERT) WOODFORD

INTERVIEWER: DONALD D. (DAVID) GASPER

DATE & PLACE: INTERVIEWED 8 NOV 2001 AT MR. WOODFORD'S CHURCH IN BELLEVILLE, IL (MEETING ROOM AT UNITED UNION METHODIST CHURCH – 721 E. Main St.)

DONALD D. GASPER: [Begin transcript – Tape 1 of 1, Side A] OK, so let's begin. My name is Donald D. Gasper and I'll be interviewing Charles A. Woodford, a crew member on a U.S. Army Air Force B-17 bomber during World War II who served in the European theater of operations. Today is the eighth of November, 2001, a Thursday, and we're at Mr. Woodford's church in Belleville, Illinois – Union United Methodist Church. Specifically, we're in one of the conference rooms here. And this is tape 1, side A. And we're beginning this tape at approximately 2:10 in the afternoon, and there may be some background noise; there's some construction going on at the church, but hopefully that won't interfere too much with our interview. This interview is being conducted as a portion of my oral history project regarding the veterans of the air war over Europe during World War II under the auspices of a graduate level course at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Specifically, the course is "Approaches to Oral History" History 447 for the Fall 2001 semester – the instructor Dr. Anne Valk. So, at this point, I'd like to ask Mr. Woodford to say his full name and spell it if he would to ensure that his name is correctly noted in the record, and then after he does that, we'll stop the tape and play it back for a sound check. So Mr. Woodford, if you would, please say and spell your full name.

CHARLES A. (ALBERT) WOODFORD: [continue] Charles A. Woodford. C-H-A-R-L-E-S, Albert, A-L-B-E-R-T, W-O-O-D-F-O-R-D.

GASPER: OK, very good and let me just ask one other question before I stop the tape. By any chance, do you know off hand your serial number or can we

WOODFORD: 39539871. [chuckle]

GASPER: I guess you know it.

WOODFORD: Never forget that!

GASPER: Alright. Well let's go ahead and stop the tape at this point and do a sound check, and stopping the tape now. [Break for sound check] OK, well, we did our sound check; everything sounds good, so let's proceed. And of course the very first question then is, Mr. Woodford, if you would please tell me the date and place of birth, and then please go on to describe your childhood, where you grew up, your schooling, your parents, and leading up to your time of military service, if you would.

WOODFORD: Well, OK, I was born the 14th of July, 1922, in Washington, Iowa. I spent my first night in a dresser drawer because they didn't have enough cribs for newborn babies. My mom and dad, we were farmers, they had a farm along with my grandfather and grandmother in a little town called Brighton, Iowa – probably some of the best times of my life as a youngster. I think that's probably when I became

interested in aviation because I can see today as clear as I could about eighty years ago, a formation of biplanes flying west to east over the farm and that really made an impression on me. I mean, I could hear them and I saw them and I think that kindled my interest in aviation. We stayed on the farm, that was during the Depression years. I think probably about when I was seven or eight, my dad had the chance to enter agriculture extension work, a kind of agricultural agent, so we moved to Sheraton, Iowa. I think we stayed there two years and then we moved to Oskaloosa, Iowa where I spent most of my grade school, all of my high school years, and which I declared my home, you know, until I was discharged from the service. I graduated from high school in 1940. During my senior year, I was taking correspondence course for an aviation aircraft school out in Glendale, California. Upon graduation, we went out to California to Glendale Aerotechnical Institute. I took my coursework there, and then I became employed at North American Aviation. And that's the first time I ever saw a B-25 bomber, and for a young lad that came off the Iowa farm, I think my chin hit the floor because I'd never seen anything that big before. I had a good career at North American and then I had a chance to transfer to Hughes aircraft experimental in Glendale, California. And I was employed there until the 31st of October, 1942 and that's when I was sworn into the Army Air Force at Fort MacArthur, California. [Los Angeles, Calif.] That was rather a funny experience; I mean, I saluted anything that had a uniform: Red Cross workers, Post Office employees, anybody that had a uniform. I took my basic there, went to Lowry Field, Denver, Colorado for Armorer school, from there to Fort Myers, Florida for gunnery school, back, no, I went to Salt Lake City for my basic, and then to Denver, Fort Myers, Florida, then back to Denver, where we were waiting assignment for our crews. I was sent to Moses Lake, Washington, that's where we all, the crew was assembled. We were the first B-17 crews to go through our phase training at Moses Lake. At that time, it was just tar paper shacks; there were no fences or gates or anything, it was just a base under construction way out into nowhere. From there we went to Walla Walla, Washington, where we, I finished up our crew training, down to Topeka Air Force Base, Kansas, and then we shipped out from Hampton Roads, Virginia.

GASPER: So you say shipping out to go overseas, then to go to your combat assignment in Europe?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: Well, OK, we're, that definitely covering quite a bit of ground there. OK, so you mentioned you grew up in a farm family, so, and you mentioned your seeing the biplanes that piqued your interest in aviation some eighty years ago. Now did you have any other family members that had any connection with the military or any service?

WOODFORD: No. No, my dad was in World War I.

GASPER: As in the Army?

WOODFORD: Yes, Army, and I had a grandfather in the Civil War, but no, he was in the Army

GASPER: As in infantry?

WOODFORD: I think it was second lieutenant.

GASPER: Second lieutenant in the infantry. Of course, there was the embryonic air service in World War I, but your dad wasn't affiliated with that, as you mentioned, he was with the infantry. OK, and your grandfather was in the Civil War. OK, so you were the first family member to get into the aviation arena, shall we say.

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: OK. And you mentioned how you went, you know, from Iowa out to California, now with your, the Aeronautical Institute, the Glendale Aeronautical Institute

WOODFORD: The Aerotechnical Institute, Aeroindustries Technical Institute, yes.

GASPER: Now that was your own, on your own initiative?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: OK.

WOODFORD: Well, my folks supported me all the time. They knew I wanted to be in aviation. At that time, I know my dad, boy, they were really scraping for money, you know, to pay for this course and to see that my tuition and everything was paid out in California. But that's where I wanted to go. We'd heard quite a bit about it and that's where we decided to go.

GASPER: Well, now when you say "we"

WOODFORD: Well, I mean that's where I, you know, I wanted to go, and mom and dad supported me all the way.

GASPER: OK, and just curious, of course I know, you're married – I guess I should state as a bit of background that, just for anyone listening to this interview, that I've had the good fortune to know Mr. Woodford for some time thanks to our mutual interest in aviation history, and Mr. Woodford has attended airshows that we have both been at and crossed paths. And in fact, Mr. Woodford also is very talented in terms of his woodworking and other craftsmanship skills. I've bought a set of what you might call wing rib shelves – very intricate woodworking skills with putting those together as well as a lamp made from the piston, well, how would you describe it?

WOODFORD: Well, it was, I think the one that you have is a piston from a World War II fighter – a 3350 engine out of probably I assume from the Vought F4U Corsair.

GASPER: I see.

WOODFORD: Well, sure, I'm pretty sure that's what it was.

GASPER: So, just to let someone know that we've had a number of interactions on aviation history, and I hope to capture a lot of what I've heard from him in the past and do justice to this topic. And of course, delve a little bit more into his military service, given the focus of this oral history project. But again, this, bottom line, this is not our first time we're "flying formation" together, you might say. So, anyways, that background aside, let me pick up again: So you moved away from home, from the farm, and went out to California to pursue your interest in aviation technology. Now, the North American Aviation plant you were working at, again, I'm not sure if I heard

WOODFORD: That was in Englewood, California.

GASPER: Englewood, California.

WOODFORD: They were producing the B-25 and the P-51 Mustang.

GASPER: So your, you mentioned you graduated from high school in '40, so you arrived out in California, roughly when?

WOODFORD: About September of 1940.

GASPER: September '40, there at North American, and then you were there a time before you went on to Hughes.

WOODFORD: Hughes, I left North American in, I think the summer of '42.

GASPER: Summer of '42.

WOODFORD: Transferred to Hughes Aircraft.

GASPER: And that Hughes, which plant, what location?

WOODFORD: That was an experimental location, at Glendale, California.

GASPER: At Glendale. So that was right near the, well of course you moved to California, you went to the Glendale Aerotechnical Institute. You went to the North American Aviation plant there at Inglewood, then you went over to Hughes back at Glendale, but as I recall you were at Hughes then from the summer of '42 until 31 October '42, when you first swore into service. OK.

WOODFORD: I had a chance to see him four or five times on occasion.

GASPER: Howard Hughes?

WOODFORD: Yes, he kept his HR –1 racer and you know you were entering "holy ground" when you went into look at that. But he would come in at some of the darndest times, and the first time I saw him, he looked like a first class bum. You know, I mean, he had raggedy clothes, not raggedy, but you know, clothes that showed quite a bit of usage. But he gave us, we were retrofitting a S-43 Amphibian with a different type of engine and we had a free reign on any ideas that we might have; and we would clear those through with the foreman and they would check with him about and see what he thought of it. He gave the OK to go. We had a blank check as far as supplies and materials and everything like that. So it was a great, I mean, it was a great experience.

GASPER: Now did Mr. Hughes actually, talk to pretty much everyone on the line?

WOODFORD: Oh yes, yes. Not that much, you know, I mean, but you know he was friendly but just casual – How's it going, what do you think of this, what do you think of that and everything like that. I mean it was pretty neat.

GASPER: So you say you saw him four or five times, and of those times how much did you actually get to talk to him?

WOODFORD: Oh yes, yes. He would come

GASPER: All four or five times you got to talk to him?

WOODFORD: Yes, he would come around to where you were working and ask you how things were going, and did you need anything, or anything we can do because I guess he was a pretty interested. I never did, well, I found out later on of what happened to that aircraft we were working on but at that time, you know, we didn't [have?] any idea. But it was a twin-engine Sikorsky, you know the Amphibian, you know, with the engine mounted on the, I think they were mounted on the wings, I believe.

GASPER: So, you not only saw him four or five times, but when you saw him, he would actually come up to each one of you and talk to you?

WOODFORD: Yes, he would talk to us, yes. You know that bothered me, because you know the pictures you hear of him later on in life, you know, I just don't like to read that. Because you know, I like to remember him the way it was fifty some years ago, you know, when I, you know, before that terrible aircraft accident he was in, you know, when he was a rational human being, but you know, he was nice. I mean, I can't complain, it was a highlight of my life at that time; to meet somebody that famous that had flown around the world, setting transcontinental speed record and here I was a young nineteen-year-old from Iowa, being able to talk to him. It was great.

GASPER: And so he was very approachable or you could, not so intimidating to talk to, he wasn't

WOODFORD: I don't think you ever approached him, I mean I never did, I always, he'd always mosey up, you know where we were working and initiate the conversation, but yes it was fantastic.

GASPER: Very good. Very good. Well, I see, now we started talking about your entry into service here with going through Fort MacArthur, Salt Lake City, Denver, Fort Myers, and then back to Denver to various schools, and I want to thank you – I'll be including some copies of some documentation materials that Mr. Woodford has kindly provided with newspaper articles, some photos of his wartime period to try and add to the transcript, to add some supplemental material to further detail some of these aspects, the training sites and that sort of thing. Now when you went through training, how was that? To what extent did you notice losses due to accidents, or wash-out of people, that, you know, they didn't quite pass muster?

WOODFORD: Well, there were a few fatal crashes you know. We really weren't, you know, I don't remember that too much. I remember [chuckle] a lot of the horseplay that went on while we were going through our crew training. I mean it was a wonder anybody ever got overseas because one of the favorite things was trying to take your plane, and put it on the wingtip of another plane and try to flip it [laughter] which isn't too intelligent. It was a lot of fun. I mean, that's when the crew got to know each other, you know. I mean, we learned to work as a team. We knew, you know, you got, you know, really familiar with some of their likes or dislikes and you knew when to back off. And I'll never forget my birthday in 1943. They had a bunch of these great big red bing cherries that they have in the state of Washington, they had a whole bunch of those on the plane – we were flying a practice gunnery mission. We were so low to the ground that the ball turret gunner couldn't see to fire because of the props were kicking up dust. That's not too smart.

GASPER: Wow, you were practically cutting the grass!

WOODFORD: [laughter] We were just about ready to plant corn! But it was great. I mean, we were young, we didn't have any responsibilities; our pilot was married, but the rest of us were all single. It was just a good time.

GASPER: Well, now let me try and understand here – the first time that you were introduced, or started flying on the aircraft that you served in during the war, was at what training base?

WOODFORD: That was at Moses Lake.

GASPER: And that's when you first got introduced to the B-17?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: And that is the aircraft that you flew all your missions on. So, you met, that's where you started flying with the crew that you would go into combat with. So this was roughly – I'm trying to get a sense of the timeline here – you first became assembled as a crew, roughly when?

WOODFORD: I think that'd be April '42 and then we left for Topeka, we left for Hampton Roads, Virginia, I think we went overseas, I think in the latter part of July.

GASPER: July of '42?

WOODFORD: No, that would have to be '43.

GASPER: Oh pardon me.

WOODFORD: Yes, '43, yes, because

GASPER: You're right. That's right you were saying you got into service in October '42. So right, we want to make sure that we get those years straight.

WOODFORD: I think we probably had about three months of crew training.

GASPER: Where you got to work together, know each other, fly together, all that, prior to going over to – [cough] excuse me, fighting off a bit of a cough and cold here – before you got to go over to the theater of operations. And you said there was some fatal crashes, but not too many.

WOODFORD: Not that I remember, no.

GASPER: And you, your training pretty much from Day 1, you knew you would be serving as, well, what position?

WOODFORD: Tailgunner.

GASPER: And so therefore going to Armorer school, now they also gave you some flight engineer training?

WOODFORD: Yes, but my primary duty was tail gunner and we were supposed to be familiar up to a certain point with every other position, in case one of them got hurt or seriously wounded, you know. Somebody could fill in on a temporary basis, you know, to man the ball turret or maybe help out in the radio room or something like that.

GASPER: Was there, well, let me put it this way, as I understand it, the top turret gunner was normally the primary flight engineer. So is that to say that with your training, your flight engineer training, that you would be his back-up or were other crew members given the same level

WOODFORD: Well, there's another crew member – we had two on our crew; we had another waist gunner that was also assistant engineer and myself. And either way, I guess, I don't know, I think that was not normal.

GASPER: Usually there was only one other person trained to be the back-up to the flight engineer, if the top turret gunner was disabled.

WOODFORD: Same way with the radio operator, you know, you had a primary radio operator and then you had a back-up.

GASPER: On your crew, who was the back-up?

WOODFORD: Radio operator?

GASPER: Right.

WOODFORD: Al Reed.

GASPER: Well, what position was he?

WOODFORD: He was a waist gunner.

GASPER: I see.

WOODFORD: Both the back-ups – Smitty, he was a waist gunner, he was assistant engineer; and then Al Reed was a back-up on the radio – and I don't know why they had me as a back-up too.

GASPER: Now when of course, you know, you were in the training phase and eventually got into the combat phase of flying in the B-17, would you say there was any consensus of opinion among the crew members about whose position they considered to have the hardest time, or maybe the most difficult position? I mean, many people, when they go see a B-17, they think of the belly turret gunner – oh, that poor guy had to really be scrunched up in that little ball turret.

WOODFORD: Yes, I can cover that now or I could cover it later. I flew one mission in the ball turret and I was never so lost in my life because you didn't have any reference point. You know when they call in something – a fighter at three o'clock or six o'clock, you were swinging around in that thing and

GASPER: Now let me understand, I mean, it's quite obvious, anyone who sees you, that you're a very tall, relatively tall individual, and let's see, you stand how, what six foot?

WOODFORD: Six, two and a half.

GASPER: Six, now tell me, getting into a ball turret, at six-two, how did that work?

WOODFORD: I operated it cross-legged. [laugh]

GASPER: [laugh] Cross-legged?

WOODFORD: Yes, that created problems, that created problems too. I mean, I was never so glad to get out of that thing in my life.

GASPER: Now you said you flew a mission in the ball turret. How many hours were you so confined?

WOODFORD: I don't remember what the target was. But most of the missions, you know, they would be six or seven hours from the time we got back.

GASPER: So you were in that ball turret for six or seven hours. Oh, I bet you were a bit, had a cramp or two getting out?

WOODFORD: [laugh] Boy, I flew two missions, my first and my last one in the ball turret. I just wanted to see what it was like.

GASPER: The very first one you flew in the ball turret?

WOODFORD: No, it was about our fifth or sixth mission, yes, after we were

GASPER: Fifth or sixth, and then did you say your last one too?

WOODFORD: No, I mean, I never flew in a ball turret again, I just

GASPER: Oh, I'm sorry, I heard that first and last and I was writing some notes down, I wasn't sure. OK. Well, so

WOODFORD: Well, I don't think any position, a lot of people think the tail gunner, that was the worst spot in the plane. I don't think it was any more dangerous than any other position because, you know, you were subject to flak or fighters, you know, no matter where you were. I think they were always equally the same as far as danger goes.

GASPER: As far as danger. It's just that the ball turret gunner tended to be, perhaps the most cramped everyone would say; yes, he's wadded up pretty good in there.

WOODFORD: Oh, he is too. [laugh]

GASPER: So you shipped out to Europe in July of '43 and you say, now, so you, how did you fly over then?

WOODFORD: No, we went over on two, on convoy.

GASPER: You went on a convoy?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: And did you incur any U-boat attacks?

WOODFORD: No, no. It took us a long time to get over there because the convoy couldn't go any faster than the slowest ship, and I know we did a lot of evasive action – zigzag and stuff like that.

GASPER: But your convoy of, well, you remember roughly, how many ships were in the convoy?

WOODFORD: No, I sure don't.

GASPER: OK, but no U-boat

WOODFORD: No, not that I'm aware of. We had some alerts, you know. But we had one funny instance that happened. I don't, kind of pathetic, maybe I shouldn't talk about it. But we had one crew that his pilot was really mean and they told, word got around, you know, if he's ever caught out on deck at nighttime, he won't get to where we're going and he didn't. [laughter]

GASPER: Oh, really.

WOODFORD: I don't know whether I should mention that or not.

GASPER: Well, it's hard to say what might have happened exactly, yes.

WOODFORD: I think everybody knows.

GASPER: Now, so you went in the convoy, do you remember roughly, did it take you how many days would you say?

WOODFORD: I think about twenty-five, twenty-six days.

GASPER: Twenty-six days by convoy?

WOODFORD: Yes, we docked at Liverpool.

GASPER: You went, was this from New York to Liverpool? Or

WOODFORD: Hampton Roads, Virginia.

GASPER: Oh, I'm sorry, that's right, you did say Hampton Roads to Liverpool. And they didn't fly you over there because

WOODFORD: Well, I don't think at that time the routes had been established, you know; whether you used to go up through Greenland and Iceland, you know. I don't think they started flying bombers over until later on. See, this was in '43 and I don't think they started ferrying planes – you know, crews taking their own plane over – until later on in the war, probably '44 maybe, latter part of '44 or sometime.

GASPER: OK, and then at that time then, you were, of course, then in a combat unit. Now what bomb group and squadron?

WOODFORD: Well, they assigned us, first we were assigned to the 100th Bomb Group.

GASPER: The "Bloody 100th"?

WOODFORD: We were lucky, we didn't realize how lucky. And on our way to the 100th, they changed our orders and we were assigned to the 388th Bomb Group, Rectangle H at Knettishall.

GASPER: Could you say that place that again? Or could you actually spell it if you could?

WOODFORD: Yes, they changed our destination to the 388th Bomb Group at Knettishall.

GASPER: Yes, and that base is what again? Net… could you spell it?

WOODFORD: K-N-E-T-T-I-S-H-A-L, maybe two L's [two L's per USAAF works] – I'm not sure. It was a little bit north and east of Cambridge, around Bury St. Edmonds.

GASPER: North and east of Cambridge around, what was that, Bury?

WOODFORD: Bury St. Edmonds, B-U-R-Y, S-T. E-D-M-U-N-D-S

GASPER: OK, that was the 388th Bomb Group and what squadron?

WOODFORD: Well, I was with the 561st.

GASPER: 561st? And that's the unit you flew all your missions with, and did you fly all your missions out of that same base?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: And you mentioned the Rectangle H.

WOODFORD: The Rectangle H, that was the identification on our rudder and on the wings.

GASPER: On the rudder and the wings. Yes. And so as you mentioned, you, the convoy left in July of '43, it took almost a month. So we're talking, what, end of July '43?

WOODFORD: Yes, then see we had to go through training, you know, we had quite a bit of flight training. We had to go to the place called "The Wash" for gunnery.

GASPER: I'm sorry that place was what?

WOODFORD: "The Wash", it was called "The Wash".

GASPER: "The Wash"?

WOODFORD: Yes, it was a, I don't know, it was a mess. It was on the channel side of England; that's where they had all the crews went for gunnery training. I guess more sophisticated up to date training, you know, as far as aircraft recognition and stuff like that.

GASPER: Well now, how did you differ, how did the training differ between state-side and over there, in terms of targets used or any other ways?

WOODFORD: I think it was more intense. I mean, it was more up to date, you know. They had more information on the fighters that we're likely to encounter, you know – what their weak spots were. We got our gunnery training fine-tuned, you know, as far as deflection, length of bursts, and things like that. I

mean, it was just a more or less a refresher course, because you see, we'd been away from it for probably about two months, probably a couple months before we were actually going into combat.

GASPER: And in training, did you get to train on fifty caliber machine guns?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: Did you ever train on thirty calibers?

WOODFORD: No.

GASPER: Always from Day 1 you always used fifties?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: And did they do anything to reduce the amount of ammunition used so that, for example, in fighters, somebody might have a fighter plane that has six or eight machine guns, but they might only allow them to use two machine guns as they did there strafing runs.

WOODFORD: Oh no.

GASPER: And was there any way that they tried to conserve ammunition use or anything?

WOODFORD: No. I mean, especially in combat, I mean, both my containers were full.

GASPER: Well, in combat, yes. I wasn't sure if in training they cut corners so to speak just to

WOODFORD: We might have had, been limited to, you know. I really don't, not sure. But we might have been limited, you know, to how many rounds we could get off. I mean, I really don't know.

GASPER: OK. Now did you ever fire at any, I recall reading that certain aircraft, P-39s were plated, where they would allow frangible bullets to be used. Did you use those types?

WOODFORD: No, I don't think that happened until later on in the war.

GASPER: Later on in the war.

WOODFORD: I think that was, yes.

GASPER: OK, so you were by and large say firing at towed targets.

WOODFORD: Yes, towed targets and stuff like that.

GASPER: And was it usually just, what was usually towed?

WOODFORD: Well, it was a sleeve.

GASPER: Just a sleeve.

WOODFORD: Yes, sleeve on a cable, yes. Then I think every so often we had bullets with greased paint on them. You know, I think every fifth one was greased painted or something like that and they can tell, you know, if you had any strikes or hits.

GASPER: On those sleeves, thanks to the grease on every nth round or so. And so, yes, you went through this training at this location they called "The Wash" for some reason. OK, and now let's see, to kind of give a sweep of your combat time, you ended up flying how many missions?

WOODFORD: Eleven.

GASPER: Eleven and as I understand it, of course, thanks to our previous interactions and some of the materials you provided today, that's, you got eleven missions in, when on the eleventh, you suffered a serious injury. So, before we get to the final mission, I would just like to hear, so the first combat mission would have occurred roughly when? What month?

WOODFORD: Probably about September. The first one was to Rheins, France. R-H-E-I-N-S, France.

GASPER: Rheins, France, and that current target was what type of?

WOODFORD: I think it was marshalling yards.

GASPER: Railroad marshalling yards, OK, and that would have been September '43.

WOODFORD: Right.

GASPER: And at that point, well, let's just say in those eleven missions, roughly, well I think you mentioned it already, that typically they were six or seven hours.

WOODFORD: Well, some of them were longer. I know the time we went to Gdynia, way up in Poland, I think that went about eleven or twelve hours – I mean, that was the longest we ever pulled. I think, I'm pretty sure that's way up there on the, that'd be the Baltic Sea or, I mean, way up north.

GASPER: Could you say that location and maybe spell it?

WOODFORD: Yes, G-D-Y-N-I-A. It was a seaport, a harbor transportation for the supplies coming into Germany.

GASPER: Up there on the Baltic.

WOODFORD: Yes, and that was a disaster because we had to go over the target twice.

GASPER: Oh my!

WOODFORD: And the second time they had us [laugh] they had our altitude, and we did a 180 and came in upwind, which slowed you down quite a bit and they were really tearing us to pieces on that one.

GASPER: Well, I should say I've had a little bit of time in the Air Force, about eight years – although I wasn't an aircrew member. I do remember hearing some of those folks I know who flew on aircraft, that one of the cardinal rules in combat is, as they tend to put it "One pass, haul ass" – you don't want to go over a target twice if at all possible. So on that mission you said it was a disaster, what kind of losses did you incur?

WOODFORD: I think we had, I don't know, our group, I think we had, I know two of them aborted and headed for Sweden and I think we had three that were shot down – just out of our group. Now I don't know what the whole, you know, what the rest of them suffered.

GASPER: Now you served during a very intense period of combat, because of course, as I've read in some books, that in the latter part of '43 was really when the air war over Europe, was in large measure determined, especially as our bomber formations, our heavy bomber formations had to often go into deep targets, unescorted. {Interviewer's note: At this point in the war, German defenses inflicted grievous losses on unescorted daylight precision bombing missions deep into Germany which undermined the notion of the "self-defending" bomber and attaining air superiority over the *Reich*. The increasing presence of long-range escort fighters by late 1943 led to the pivotal battles in early 1944 which decimated the

Luftwaffe with growing losses among the more experienced German pilots.] So to what extent of your eleven missions did you go unescorted?

WOODFORD: Well, all of them really.

GASPER: Well, I imagine you had some short range coverage and then the fighters had to turn back

WOODFORD: Yes, we had, we could have Spitfires that cover us maybe about ten to fifteen minutes inside France or inside the channel, and because that was before drop tanks and belly tanks. And they had to turn back, you know, because of fuel supply and the Luftwaffe was aware of that. So they held their fighters on the ground or maybe in the air, you know, waiting until the escorts had to turn back and then they'd come in on us.

GASPER: So all your missions only had very limited escort and then it was pretty much, you were all on your own with the guns on board the bombers, and you never really had a chance to have a fully escorted mission with the drop-tank equipped P-51s or any other aircraft since your last mission had occurred before all that had come to pass.

WOODFORD: Right.

GASPER: Now what would you say was your typical targets?

WOODFORD: Well, it would depend, at Schweinfurt, we did the Schweinfurt raid, that was a ball-bearing factory.

GASPER: You were on the Schweinfurt raid when sixty bombers went down?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: That was in

WOODFORD: That was in forty, oh gosh, that was in August of '43, I believe. Bremen, I think Bremen, we hit Bremen three times; I think that was the, oh gosh, I think that was factories and you know, I really don't know what the targets were. That was one place I hated because I mean that flak there, you could get out and walk on it.

GASPER: Bremen, Bremen was a pretty tough go.

WOODFORD: I was lucky because I didn't have to look at it; when I saw the flak, we were through it.

GASPER: Since you were in the tail?

WOODFORD: Yes. And then we flew one really tough mission to Duren, D-U-R-E-N [Germany]; and I don't know where we dropped our bombs because we didn't hit the target. Recon planes went out and the target was still there, and to this day, I don't know what we bombed.

GASPER: Well, you said it was a tough mission.

WOODFORD: Well, I mean, I was just kidding tough, you know. I mean, it was, somebody fouled up and got lost.

GASPER: Oh, a foul up – it wasn't so much that you got mauled.

WOODFORD: No, it was just, somebody got bombed that shouldn't have been bombed because we didn't hit our target. I don't know what we hit, I just

GASPER: So you mentioned your first mission to a marshalling yard; the very lengthy eleven/twelve hour mission to the seaport on the Baltic; of course the ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt; Bremen, a very well-known seaport

WOODFORD: Yes, I think that's an industrial area seaport.

GASPER: And industrial area, yes.

WOODFORD: Then we hit marshalling yards, you know, just any city that had a war, you know, where a lot of war effort, a lot of war production was going on.

GASPER: Well, now of course, especially that Schweinfurt mission, is almost in any book on the air war in Europe as one of the most demanding, bloody, and well, any number of words can be ascribed to that mission, that given the loss of sixty aircraft and on a percentage basis, what tremendous losses there were. What else might you want to add about that mission, your experiences in flying that very famous mission?

WOODFORD: You were just awfully glad you got back. I mean, it was a total disaster because the Luftwaffe, of course everybody, you know, now you know they had, they brought down their fighters from the north, you know. We were under constant fighter attack from the time we got in 'til the escorts left us until we got back to the coast, and it was just strictly every bomb group and on their own defensive firepower.

GASPER: So to what extent, did you find that your group, in going on the Schweinfurt mission, did you manage to have a relatively less harried mission, in terms of other groups tended to get bounced more, you just happened to be fortunate that in the bomber stream, you didn't get maybe as much attention?

WOODFORD: I think a lot of our group's success was the tight formation we flew. I mean they stressed that tight formation, which was your best means of defense, and we really flew tight formations. Some of the other groups would get spread out, you know, and the Luftwaffe would come right in on them. You know, they started working away at the "tail-end Charlie", "Purple Heart Corner" and work their way up, and just a good tight formation was the best thing you could do because you were pretty well covered and of course, you were still going to have some losses you know. There was no way in the world you were going to prevent losses. But we came through Schweinfurt, I think we only lost, I think three or four planes that day.

GASPER: Out of how many you put up?

WOODFORD: I think we had twenty-four, so we came out of that in good shape.

GASPER: Now, of course, again that was a very pivotal time of the air war, with air superiority being fought for by both sides very strenuously. And still there were of course, many high quality Luftwaffe pilots still in the force before they started suffering such disastrous losses themselves with the introduction of long-range escort fighters that could accompany the bombers throughout their mission and take the battle also to the German airfields and try and shoot them down, shoot them on the ground, or as well as hit the factories that made the planes and then also eventually the fuel lines, the fuel supplies that made the Luftwaffe a force. But I guess, at that pivotal time, my question would be about the defenses: To what extent did fighters and flak, how did you view them in terms of, what concerned you the most?

WOODFORD: Well, the flak did because you couldn't do anything about it. Fighters, if we would see, you know, "Goering's Yellow Noses", that was a crack fighter outfit if they'd come in, at least we had some twin-fifties, you know, we had something in our hands that we could do, you know, we could take some action. Going on the bomb run, you just had to sit there at a certain altitude, a certain speed, and you had to take the flak – I mean, there wasn't a thing you could do about it. But the fighters, you know, at least maybe we were successful sometimes. But at least we had in our hands a couple of fifties, you know, at least I'm doing something, I'm not sitting there not doing anything.

GASPER: Of course the tail position, you had twin-fifties and, well, without going through each crew position, I mean, of course the waist gunners, they had usually single fifties. Did you ever fly with I believe it was called the YB-40, which was a more heavily armed version of the B-17 – kind of a gun-ship you might say.

WOODFORD: No. Yes, they weren't, I don't think they were flying when we were flying.

GASPER: Never with your group?

WOODFORD: No. I'll say one thing, these Luftwaffe pilots were good. I mean, they were brave, because, you know, you come in tail-end on a plane, you'd have two, four, six, you could possibly have seven or eight guns, just from one plane firing at you; and if you've got a whole group, you know, at you, you know, I mean, there's a lot of lead coming your way. And they didn't back off. I mean, they came right through the formations from the tail, and they'd come in head-on attacks – they were brave, they were good.

GASPER: Now, when you talk about what all you know you were dealing with, with the defenses, and of course, the eleventh mission was very difficult because of your injury; to what extent did you find that in the other missions prior to the last one, that your aircraft got shot up and you know, they were counting holes when you got back to base?

WOODFORD: Well, I think we took flak probably about on every mission but two. I don't think we picked up any flak on our first mission, and the time we went to Duren we didn't pick up any flak. But you know usually there was few holes, maybe even quite a few depending upon where you happened to be at that point of time.

GASPER: Did you lose any crew members in any of the flights?

WOODFORD: No, you mean on our crew?

GASPER: Your crew. Nobody took a fatal shot through those missions. OK, now of course with these defenses, the prospect of being shot down was very real. How did you view your prospects of, well, let me just before I get into this question, I think maybe I'm going to check the tape – we may be running just about out – let me double check here if I can reach over and see where we're at. [pause] Look's like we might have a couple minutes or so left, but let me go ahead then and press on with this, maybe just one more question, and then maybe we'll stop it. What did you view as your prospects if you would get shot down for POW treatment? Did you feel like you would

WOODFORD: Well, when we were there the life expectancy – we didn't find out until we got actually flying combat – three missions was the average expectancy. I don't really, everyone of us had probably our own thoughts, you know, of whether we were going to make it, or whether we didn't, we didn't talk about it to each other. I think you more or less kept it to yourselves, you know. You were awfully happy to get back on the ground after you got done with a mission, you know; that was one more step closer to getting home.

GASPER: Because at that time, you were obliged to serve twenty-five?

WOODFORD: Twenty-five missions, yes.

GASPER: To what extent, with the losses you had then, did you run into this feeling of an "empty bunk syndrome" you might say, where everytime you come back it's like well, you know, there's these guys aren't in the bunks or these guys aren't at the mess hall or was that pretty much every mission, you had that sense, oh, gee, those guys, they caught it today.

WOODFORD: I'd probably say about half of the time, yes.

GASPER: About half the time it was very noticeable?

WOODFORD: Yes, you know, we had one thing happen one time, that I've often wondered about. We had our one young lad, he wanted to get out of service, and he wanted to go back to Texas and be a sheriff. And we thought, just one night we knew we were scheduled to fly the next morning and he went around the barracks and gave away all of his personal effects. We thought he'd ready for the R & R and, you know, we had that mission the next morning – I forget where it was – one plane got hit and one person was killed, and that was him.

GASPER: Maybe he had a premonition?

WOODFORD: He had to have a premonition that, because you know we were, we were really thought, you know, he'd gone a little bit off the deep end, you know, too much combat.

GASPER: Yes, I want to ask you about, I'm just going to check the tape one more time here. Yes, I think I might as well shut it down so I don't make a habit of stopping this, or looking at it all the time. So we're going to stop it here and flip it over.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

GASPER: OK, so we're back here with side B. Now you mentioned that fella who must have had a premonition and gave away his personal effects and that, you know, you considered him a candidate for the flak house and well, here it comes to pass, he actually happened to be the guy that "bought the farm" as they say. To what extent did you notice crewmen getting sent to the so-called "flakhouse", the R & R center, where battle fatigue personnel could just take a time out.

WOODFORD: Well, the first mission that we were on, one of the crews that came over that we'd gone through all the training with in the states [unintelligible] the first mission, radio operator went berserk and that was on the mission to Rheins, and he went to the hospital and they sent him back home. But as far I as I know, that's the only one that I'm aware of. You know, crews were coming and going and you know these are lost or something like that. I really don't remember too many of them going to R & R.

GASPER: So, and you say when that guy went berserk, did he do anything to jeopardize his crew?

WOODFORD: Oh, he tore up the radio compartment. I mean, he just, and, you know, there wasn't any, you know, it – I guess their first mission is scary but you know, really, you look back on it and it wasn't that bad, but he just couldn't handle it. And you know that's no disrespect to him.

GASPER: So, you of course knew that there was this flakhouse possibility, that anyone who needed a timeout, but you didn't see too many people actually get sent off to that.

WOODFORD: No. No. I think it was kind of a pride thing too. I think you wanted, you didn't want to let them know, I mean, it's getting to you, you know. I think you wanted to get your missions in, and you didn't want to let your crew down and you know you just stuck with it.

GASPER: Now one thing I was also kind of wondering about was if you would get shot down, how you felt about your prospects for treatment in the German, you know, the Stalag Luft [a prison camp for airmen] whatever. Did you have concern that, did you have any reports or any concern that the local Germans or well; of course, it depends if you're shot down over occupied France, you might have a better feel for how the locals might treat you, but how did you view the differences between being shot down

WOODFORD: We really didn't think about it because, you know, we didn't have any feedback, you know, about the underground, you know, bringing people back. We just, we had our escape kit. You just

never thought about it. If that happens, you probably just wait until that fatal moment, you know, and then do what you wanted to do or had to do, but we really never thought about it that much.

GASPER: No feedback on the underground or the POW camps really. OK. You mentioned the escape kit – what was in there?

WOODFORD: Oh, golly. We had, I think we had some German money; we had a little compass; we had a map; I think we had some candy bars or you know some water purification tablets; you know, just the basic stuff, you know, to I guess kind of keep us going until we got our senses and figured out what to do after that.

GASPER: Nothing, better than nothing, and give you a little more confidence if you needed it. Now, also, I'm wondering to what extent, you know, with all the concerns about fighters, flak, and that, to what extent did you notice non-combat losses, where weather, you know, where you're trying to get the formation together maybe in the fog or something.

WOODFORD: Well, the weather was bad. I mean, if you had to form up in the overcast, you know, everybody had to fly at a certain compass heading, a certain rate of climb, and all that stuff and I'm surprised there weren't more midair collisions than there were; because you could always tell when there was one because great big sections of the sky would light up, where two of them came together. We just about got it wrong one mission. A plane came out of nowhere, and I mean, if it hadn't been a split second action on the pilot, you know, we would have gotten it. Because, you see, there were bomber bases all over England, and then another thing that I think that was dangerous too, was when a new crew would go on a mission. And we had one experience where a waist gunner, we were under fighter attack and he put a string of fifty caliber bullets right through our plane. He didn't let off and our left waist gunner, he was going to shoot that plane down. I mean, boy, they had to pull him away from the guns because he was going to take that one out.

GASPER: And lucky nobody on the plane got hit?

WOODFORD: Nobody got hurt, but boy

GASPER: He really laced it.

WOODFORD: He could have put a needle into it and done the nicest sewing job on it. Well, he just got carried away. And Smitty, that was the waist gunner, he was pretty mild mannered, but the other waist gunner had to pull him away from the guns or he would have taken that one out of the air, I'm sure.

GASPER: Well, now you said you just about had a midair collision yourself, do you remember that, did you have any awareness that that was about to happen?

WOODFORD: No, the first thing I saw was the plane coming in just right on the tail, and I hollered for the pilot to "dump it", and we went down, and I don't know how close he came. I mean, it was scary.

GASPER: Well, let me understand, so you saw this plane coming up at you from the rear, and you hollered

WOODFORD: No, he was coming up, let's see, he was coming towards us and I don't, and I

GASPER: Coming toward you head on?

WOODFORD: No, he was coming towards the tail.

GASPER: He was coming, and you saw him coming?

WOODFORD: Yes, I just had "boom" I hollered "Dump it!" and evidently Lt. [unintelligible – Forbes?] knew what I meant, and I don't

GASPER: "Dump it" means, get low, or drop your altitude?

WOODFORD: Get it down in a hurry, and I don't know how close he came but

GASPER: And he flew right over the top of you?

WOODFORD: He went right over the top of the rudder, yes, and even the waist gunner, the radio operator saw it [laugh] and the nose when they saw him go over. You know, it just happened so fast, you know, why and it was just

GASPER: So was, the crew, did the crew say, hey thanks to you, thanks for you quickly alerting us?

WOODFORD: Well, I guess so, yes. I just, you know, boy, "boom" and it was gone.

GASPER: Well, I imagine, what nine other guys probably owed you a big thank you.

WOODFORD: Well, I don't know. I just [laugh] but he just came out of nowhere, I mean.

GASPER: I imagine. It's my understanding the B-17 had ten crew members on board, so you generally always had ten on board, right?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: Did you ever have anybody fly along for whatever reason, like oh, a cameraman, or a flight surgeon might want to go up or

WOODFORD: Not on our plane. They might have in another plane. We just flew with our standard crew.

GASPER: I see. And of course the B-17 is quite legendary in terms of its ability to withstand punishment. What would you say to that?

WOODFORD: I would say that's correct. I've seen some of them come home tattered and torn. Some of them have been in such bad shape that the engineers say that they can't fly, but you know somehow they managed to bring it back and they could really take a beating.

GASPER: Well, was there any mission where you found your own aircraft, that you had to, you know, feather engines or whatever?

WOODFORD: Yes, we had to feather, I don't know how many times, not the normal. But you know it happened just enough to really really get your attention, and we come home with a pretty good size hole in the wing or peppered or pretty well perforated sometimes.

GASPER: So you had to feather an engine, well, out of the eleven missions you went on, you had that

WOODFORD: I probably imagine we probably lost maybe about, probably about four times. Maybe they either took a flak hit or maybe, you know, the prop ran away or, you know, some malfunction on the engine or something like that.

GASPER: And then did your, was your aircraft always repairable?

WOODFORD: Oh yes.

GASPER: What was the nose art on your aircraft?

WOODFORD: "Lady Lillian".

GASPER: "Lady Lillian".

WOODFORD: Just the name – there wasn't any picture. That was the pilot's wife.

GASPER: Pilot's wife and, but there was no painting of the, just the name and no, no scantily-clad

WOODFORD: [laugh] No. No.

GASPER: And that was, did you always fly that same aircraft on each mission?

WOODFORD: Not all the time because sometime it might be in for an inspection or maybe sometimes it might be in for a repair you know. If we flew a mission back to back, and, you know, it was undergoing a repair, why we would be assigned to another one, and you didn't like that.

GASPER: You liked to stay on the same

WOODFORD: You liked to stay on the old one that you're familiar with and everything.

GASPER: Now, serving as the tail gunner, did you, to what extent did you or other crew members get credit or partial credit for hitting German aircraft?

WOODFORD: None.

GASPER: A lot of bullets fired.

WOODFORD: A lot of bullets and, you know, if everybody claims had been honored the Luftwaffe would have been decimated by Thanksgiving. If you were a straggler then probably you could, you know, if you had somebody witness, you know, but you know it was, we didn't even put in claims. We did maybe first one or two missions and then we just saw, you know, what does it matter. I mean, all it does is gets you one towards an air medal or something like that, and with all the bullets flying out it's pretty hard to do that.

GASPER: Well, so you just, with all the bullets flying, and everybody shooting, it's pretty hard to sort out who's

WOODFORD: Yes, who did it, yes.

GASPER: Did you see any aircraft, any German aircraft get hit?

WOODFORD: Oh yes. We'd see them hit and we'd see them go over on their back or maybe go down in smoke, you know. I mean, go down, straight down. And I, very seldom I ever saw a chute open because they were probably going so fast and we were going away from the action too. I mean, saw a lot of 17s going down, you know, that was kind of common but a, German aircraft, you know

GASPER: And then, what, when you saw a 17 go down, you'd always, the crews would always try and watch and count chutes and see

WOODFORD: Count the chutes and see how many would go out. And of course, everybody was doing that and hoping and praying you'd see ten and sometimes you didn't have a chance, you know, it would blow up right, "boom", like that, and they were gone.

GASPER: To what extent, did B-17s tend to blow up without giving much chance to get out or was that fairly infrequent?

WOODFORD: Well, that just depended upon where you got hit. You know, if you got hit in the say in the fuselage, bombbay, or where the wing roots and the bomb bay, I mean, it was all over with. A lot of times if you had a wing fire, you know, you might have a chance to bail out unless it was so hot, you know, that the wing fell off or something like that. So it was, it just depended upon where you took your hits.

GASPER: Well, now tell me about your typical day; in other words, that is, a day when you would fly a mission. Roughly, and I know there were variations, you know, how long a mission might be and all that sort of thing. But for most of those missions, when you typically got up, got your chow, went off to briefing, you know, kick the props and that sort of thing, and then you fly the mission and then you come back for your debriefing – could you try and go over the flow of a day?

WOODFORD: Well, they'd wake us up in the morning if we were scheduled to fly. That would probably be, depending on the mission, maybe three-thirty, four o'clock in the morning, we'd get dressed and

GASPER: Now did you, you would know the night before that you had a mission?

WOODFORD: Well, we knew somebody was going to fly, the base was on alert but we didn't know

GASPER: By crew, you didn't know?

WOODFORD: We didn't know until

GASPER: They didn't even tell you by crew?

WOODFORD: No.

GASPER: I mean, of course, there not going to tell you the target location and all that ahead of time, or, you know, the night before. But they didn't, it was a crapshoot, you didn't know who was actually going to be flying?

WOODFORD: You didn't know it was until they opened the barracks door and hollered [Forbes?] crew and then they'd read off your names.

GASPER: Oh really. So I imagine that didn't feel too good.

WOODFORD: [laugh] No it didn't.

GASPER: That every morning it was a crapshoot, who's going to actually have to go. And then of course, when you get to the briefing, you find out where you're going to go, and whether or not that's even worse news. So OK, I'm sorry, I'm interrupting you. I just wasn't sure if you knew the night before.

WOODFORD: No, we didn't know until they came in there with that dog-gone flashlight and wake you up; and then we got to get dressed, shower, get dressed, and always shaved because, you know, you wanted a good tight fit on your oxygen mask; and then we'd go to the mess hall for the powdered eggs and spam, you know; and then we had to be at the briefing at a certain time, and that was a happy time. I mean, everybody was talking and jabbering until they pulled your curtains aside, and then a lot of times it got real serious.

GASPER: Well, let me understand here – so you say, you're up three-thirty or four very often, and then you shave and you go off to breakfast and so you're starting to brief, maybe what time?

WOODFORD: Oh, that depended upon take-off time, maybe sometimes around five-thirty, six, six-thirty – somewhere around in there, you know, depending upon the target and how much, how long we had to be in the air and everything like that, and the weather.

GASPER: And then how soon after the, and the what, the briefing would take usually how long?

WOODFORD: Well, they'd brief all the crews together and then the pilots and navigators and bombardiers had separate briefings. The whole crew briefing probably take maybe twenty minutes, maybe twenty, twenty-five minutes.

GASPER: Typically, OK. And you said the bomb-navs or the bombardiers and the navigators and the pilots, they each had separate briefings?

WOODFORD: Yes, that's where they went over their courses, you know, they had to set their watches.

GASPER: Is that to say all three types of positions were in one briefing or

WOODFORD: No, the bombardiers went to one, navigators to another, and pilot and co-pilot went to another. They got information on particular, you know, combat they had to know.

GASPER: And so after the briefings were done, what would you normally be taking off within an hour or two hours?

WOODFORD: Maybe an hour, an hour and a half. We had to get out our flight gear, and then take the trucks out to where the aircraft was, and went through the pre-flight, making sure everything was checked out, check your guns and ammunition. That was probably the worst part of the mission, before you took off. I mean, you know, the apprehension, you wonder when you're going to make it back or what's going to happen.

GASPER: Was there, well, of course, we talked about the Schweinfurt mission some, where that became such a legendary mission with the terrible losses. And you mentioned, you know, the pulling of the curtains was quite a dramatic moment. Was there anytime you noticed where they pulled the curtains and told you a target and people just, just about dropped their jaw?

WOODFORD: No.

GASPER: What ones would you say rank up there as

WOODFORD: Bremen.

GASPER: Bremen, that was

WOODFORD: That was flak valley, that was down in a river valley, that was the one

GASPER: People dreaded really.

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: And the day you went to Schweinfurt for that terribly famous mission, did it really dawn on many people that that might be a rough go?

WOODFORD: No. They told us it would be rough, but we were concerned about the length, you know. The whole, the entire crews were briefed if you got in trouble, go over the Alps, you know, and hit neutral territory. But no, nobody had any idea, you know, that it was going to be that kind of a disaster. But on the same token, you know, about, I forget when it was, it was in October, we were briefed to hit Berlin; which would have been a complete disaster, because we didn't have fighter escort, it would have been touch and

go on the range, you know, as far as fuel supplies and, but everybody was really, we were uptight about that one. They cancelled it before we got airborne. I mean, somebody must have gotten wise or something. But Bremen, boy, that probably drew the most comments and raspberries and stuff like that (laugh) when they pulled the curtain apart.

GASPER: Any others that come to mind where people just said, "oh, shit" or whatever.

WOODFORD: [laugh] Oh, you always had a little bit of comment, you know, but Bremen usually drew the

GASPER: That was the one. Now, OK, and then we said how the missions varied in duration, and then when you got back, what, everybody participated in the debrief typically?

WOODFORD: Yes, all the crews had to go in a debriefing and that probably took, depending upon how bad the action was, you know, maybe that took maybe half hour, forty-five minutes. And then you'd turn in your flight gear and you were on your own, head over to the mess hall. Mess hall was always open for the flight crews. We always had something to eat when we got back.

GASPER: So a half-hour to forty-five minutes if there were things, you know, to go over. Then so, what would you say, with your experience, with your eleven missions, were you actually flying combat every, well, X number of days -- how often would you say it turned out for you?

WOODFORD: Well, somedays you'd go maybe a week without flying because of the weather. Sometimes you might fly missions back to back, you know.

GASPER: You mean one day and then the next?

WOODFORD: Yes. And then also, they were getting enough aircraft in, you know, that maybe the group flew missions, that you didn't fly, you know, you weren't scheduled to fly – that was your day off.

GASPER: So, you mentioned how they would come in, in the morning, hey, so and so's crew, up and at 'em, and so, what, when you'd hear somebody going around to the different barracks and then the only way you knew you weren't going, or would they, or would somebody pop their head in the door and say, hey, so and so's crew, you're off the hook today?

WOODFORD: No.

GASPER: Or was it just the matter of, you figured it out because they never bothered to call you.

WOODFORD: Well, we had our names on the end of our bunks and he would go by with a flashlight that he would kick each bed, you know, I mean, you're flying today.

GASPER: Well, but it was by crew, wasn't it?

WOODFORD: Yes, by crew. Those that weren't flying, you know, they'd get woke up, they'd probably go back to sleep, you know, probably be happy that they didn't have to go.

GASPER: Well, in a given barracks, you would have, what, enough guys from how many crews in a given barracks?

WOODFORD: We probably, I imagine, about eight crews.

GASPER: To a barracks?

WOODFORD: To a barracks, probably.

GASPER: So that's where, within a barracks, you might have so many of them being tapped to go on today's mission.

WOODFORD: Maybe two crews might

GASPER: But because they're going around, it quickly becomes apparent who's been tapped to go and who got skipped over; and then did you notice any method to that madness, of how people were assigned to fly on a given day?

WOODFORD: No, I don't know how it was. I don't know how they decided who's going to go on what mission or not. I think they usually took your top pilots or top crews, you know, to fly lead and deputy lead, you know, that really had their heads on right and knew what they were doing.

GASPER: Now, of course, with your eleventh mission – again I don't want, you know, to bring up things that you might not want to go into much detail on – but obviously the eleventh mission was your last mission, and it involved serious injury to you that required lengthy hospitalization. So I'm wondering to what extent you'd want to describe what happened on that mission and not, of course, what the target, what happened with your aircraft, and then what happened with you in particular and how it

WOODFORD: Well, we were on the bomb run and

GASPER: To what target?

WOODFORD: To Bremen.

GASPER: That was to Bremen.

WOODFORD: And the last thing I remember was a noise that sounded like it took a bunch of coal cinders and threw them in a garbage can and shook them. I mean, that's my last recollection of the war. I mean, just like somebody took a GI can with bricks or hunks of concrete and dropped it on the floor, that was my, that's the last thing I remember.

GASPER: And now this was the eleventh mission to Bremen – you were over Bremen at the time?

WOODFORD: Well, we were. I don't know how close we were to the target, but we were on the bomb run.

GASPER: On the bomb run.

WOODFORD: Yes, and flak got us.

GASPER: And big flak burst, and you heard this tremendous noise and so, how, what happened, how close was the burst?

WOODFORD: I have no idea. It was close enough to get me.

GASPER: Well, so you got peppered with flak. How many pieces would you say?

WOODFORD: Well, the tail was pretty well mutilated. I think they took out, you see, I had one under my eye, I got lucky on that; I had probably about, oh gosh, 'bout eight or nine.

GASPER: Eight or nine pieces of flak in you?

WOODFORD: Well, this is kind of gruesome, I hate to, when they put me in the hospital, they built a frame over me so nothing would touch me, you know, something like a tent, you know, and then they put sheets over that. I guess I was a mess, I mean, because I froze both my hands and feet.

GASPER: Although I see today, you know, you got, so your hands got frozen at altitude, of course, and feet, but apparently, without the loss of any fingers or toes.

WOODFORD: No, I was awfully close to it, but no. Evidently, when they pulled me out, of course, the heated suit wasn't working and I'd taken off my gloves, which was a – I don't know, in my state of unconsciousness, I must have been doing something, I mean, I don't know.

GASPER: The heated, your heated suit didn't work?

WOODFORD: Well, I, it was unplugged, probably went out when I got hit.

GASPER: Oh. Now did, from what you've been able to piece together after-the-fact, so somebody, obviously they knew the back of the plane had gotten hit and someone, one of the crew members came back to

WOODFORD: I think the radio operator and one of the waist gunners got me out. And of course, you know, with all your heavy flying gear and stuff like that, it must have been a struggle; and I know, they said they gave me morphine.

GASPER: So the flak that hit you, you mentioned one went under the eye, and there were eight or nine pieces. Where else did you get hit?

WOODFORD: Well, I had some on my leg, you know, just scattered a bit, kind of I guess.

GASPER: And all of which have or were removed during the war?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: They didn't leave any in?

WOODFORD: No.

GASPER: And I think before we started our interview, you mentioned, you even have one of the pieces today?

WOODFORD: I've got a little piece at home, yes, 'bout a little bit larger than a pea.

GASPER: Would you say that was the, well, how did it come to pass that you got that particular piece?

WOODFORD: I really don't know. I had that in the hospital at Oxford. I don't know how I happened, maybe the doctor took it out and gave it to me. I really don't know, but it was in a little sack.

GASPER: It wasn't like you were asking for

WOODFORD: Oh no. I do remember he said you might want this as a souvenir.

GASPER: And did he say if that was the smallest one or the biggest one?

WOODFORD: No.

GASPER: And you still have that today, at your house. Well, that might make a museum someday or something, or a family heirloom of some sort.

WOODFORD: [laugh] It's not that impressive of a piece, you know, it just

GASPER: So you got, I believe, you said the tail was pretty well mauled and you got peppered pretty well, but did it leave any lasting impairment for you? I see you don't appear to have any.

WOODFORD: Oh no, I came out fine. I was very close to having, being a, what you call, a quadri-, you know, about twenty-four hours of having my feet and hands amputated. Boy, I convinced the doctors I could feel something, you know, I was beginning to feel something and they didn't believe me and they blindfolded me and evidently they took needles and they touched different fingers and I was able to tell them, you know, which ones they were, so I was saved on that.

GASPER: So they really were testing you, and you passed the blindfold test, otherwise you might have lost your hands and feet.

WOODFORD: Oh, it was pathetic, I tell you. I don't know how they saved them because it was, it was horrible, I mean I just

GASPER: Now were you married at this time?

WOODFORD: No, no.

GASPER: Not married yet, so or sweetheart type thing at that point? Was there a certain sweetheart?

WOODFORD: Oh yes. Well, I went with the same young lady in high school my junior and senior years, and whenever I'd come home you know, why we'd date.

GASPER: And the same girl that became your partner in life?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: So I imagine there was quite a bit of concern that, you know, how are you going to pull through with these very serious injuries.

WOODFORD: Well, with the information they got, you know, it didn't give any detail at all.

GASPER: Oh, the very cryptic telegram that, I appreciate you still have that copy today and I'll make a copy so that anyone can see -- well, actually let me go ahead and just read it; it's so short here, let me pick it up here. It's a telegram from Western Union, of course, and its very brief indeed. It's got here basically from Washington, D.C. on December 29th of, that would be '43. But now this last mission was in November of '43, right?

WOODFORD: Yes.

GASPER: It took that long for this telegram to come about, so, do you remember the date of your last mission? November of '43?

WOODFORD: Boy, I sure don't, it was

GASPER: Well, I was just wondering because here it is today, 8 November, I was just wondering

WOODFORD: It's pretty close to that.

GASPER: We might be on the anniversary or pretty close to it.

WOODFORD: We might be on that time, but I think the twenty-ninth of November.

GASPER: Twenty-ninth of November. Well, I'm sure that's an anniversary you don't try and remember all that often. Well, anyways, the telegram is to, I believe, what, your dad, here, Raymond E. Woodford,

and this would have gone to Oskaloosa, Iowa — "REGRET TO INFORM YOU YOUR SON STAFF SERGEANT CHARLES A. WOODFORD WAS ON 29 NOVEMBER" (Oh, there's the date) "SERIOUSLY INJURED IN ACTION IN THE EUROPEAN AREA. YOU WILL BE ADVISED AS REPORTS OF CONDITION ARE RECEIVED." Signed "ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL." And it's just that short, just that brief. So can only imagine the concern a parent would have of those words, "seriously injured in action", and how you would fare with such grievous injuries. And well, we're happy to report that you managed quite well and here you are at the age of, let me see, I

WOODFORD: 79. [chuckle]

GASPER: You're going to be 79 here

WOODFORD: I'm 79 now, I'll be 80 next July.

GASPER: Next July, right, I was just double-checking the birthday here and math is not my strong suit. OK, yes, 79, and no dust gathering on you, which one thing I'm wondering about is – just doing a quick time check, we're doing pretty good on time here. Do you see anything at all in the Hollywood films, or books, or documentaries that maybe have little or no mention, or maybe things that they didn't quite get right, anything at all that you think should be pointed out to anyone who would want to know more about the air war over Europe.

WOODFORD: Well, I think the best movie was this last one on "Memphis Belle". That one that came out, what, about four or five years ago. I think that was probably, my wife and I saw that, and I left the theater, and I mean, my shirt was wet, and I mean it was, it took you back about fifty years. Those that came out during the war, I think, they just portrayed the glamour of the war, you know, and I don't think there's too much of historic fact, you know; I wouldn't put too much hope on the historic fact on some of those.

GASPER: But that "Memphis Belle", that, that brought back you "were there" memories?

WOODFORD: Yes, that was a good one, that told it actually as it was. *Twelve O'clock High* was another good one but that

GASPER: With Gregory Peck.

WOODFORD: Yes, that was a good one. But those that came out, you know, in the '42s and '43s, you know, I guess they were all right, but you know weren't that, as far as I'm concerned, that accurate.

GASPER: OK, well, certainly from a guy who was there, that's pretty good to learn what you endorse and what you say, you know, isn't maybe true to form, so to speak, or true to life. One thing I'm wondering about, then after your recovery, if you'd just maybe sketch out your, the remainder of your military service and then what you did post-war as far as a career, and where you lived, and kind of the other life phases you might say.

WOODFORD: Well, I was in the hospital from the 29th of November until about April.

GASPER: And that would have been April of '44.

WOODFORD: Yes, '44. I came home on a hospital ship. I went to Walter Reed [Naval Hospital, Washington D.C.] and Hot Springs, Arkansas. I got released, thirty-day stay, and then went to Atlantic City for reassignment. And that's when I went down to Maxwell Field [Alabama] for cadet training. I got through my pre-flight training, I was at the

GASPER: Now, cadet training as a

WOODFORD: As a, well, hopefully a pilot, but I guess my scores and all that, they decided to send me to navigation school, Selma Field, Louisiana. I enjoyed that, I was doing good, and of course, that was probably the low spot in my career. I'd gone through all my flying and training and all that stuff, and they checked my records and didn't want to assign me back to a flight status because of the chance of, you know, something happening that might be create permanent injury. Went from there to San Antonio, Texas, then up to Lowry Field and Omaha where I

GASPER: Let me just backtrack a second. I think you mentioned, in one of our previous conversations, that navigator school that you were, what, within about two weeks of graduation?

WOODFORD: Yes, about two weeks. I had my uniform ordered and everything like that and announcements all printed and then, boy, the bottom fell out.

GASPER: That they wouldn't make an exception, even though you were so close to graduating; that they, they just stood firm and said no, we can't let you go on and become a navigator – you had some serious injuries and we don't know if those might flare into something permanent.

WOODFORD: Well, looking back on it, I can see their point of view. Because when I went through my training, you know, that was all low altitude, you know, that wasn't up in the temperatures, you know, where it was forty degrees below zero and stuff like that. But it was awfully hard to accept. I mean, that was probably the worst three or four day period in my whole career.

GASPER: So you got out of the service then, well, you, after the navigator school, I just want to make sure, you then went

WOODFORD: Went to San Antonio for reassignment and went up to Lowry Field, Denver on B-29's.

GASPER: B-29 engine work?

WOODFORD: Yes, and that was great. Believe it or not, I hitchhiked home every weekend to Iowa from Denver to see my girlfriend, to see my wife, my future wife.

GASPER: Well!

WOODFORD: I had that down to a T. I mean, I knew going through Nebraska, when the bus came and if I wasn't in a car, I could catch that bus and ride to Council Bluffs. And I was never late for duty; I was always home on a Saturday morning for a late breakfast and I left Sunday morning and I was never late for duty, never missed a day's work.

GASPER: "Where there's a will, there's a way," huh?

WOODFORD: Boy, I must have, well, I knew I was in love. I mean, I just, well, anyway, I got out on thirty October – I spent three years to the day, got out in '45, I went home

GASPER: Got out in October of '45?

WOODFORD: October '45, and I went back to Iowa. Didn't do much until January and I enrolled in college under the GI Bill. My wife and I were married in April of 1946 and have been married ever since, and a wonderful marriage. We went to, I went to college on the GI Bill and finished up too, and went out to Pennsylvania, a little town in Pennsylvania in [Federal] Civil Service. We wanted to get back into the Midwest, so we applied for a transfer to Scott Air Force Base. We arrive at Scott in 1950 and

GASPER: Here in Illinois.

WOODFORD: Yes, here in Illinois, had a real good crew, I retired in 1979.

GASPER: Primarily doing what in Civil Service?

WOODFORD: Well, I started out on the flight line, and then I went up into quality control, and I ended up in engineering. A good three years in budget and finance, and then the last three years was up in engineering. A great career, I mean, I look back on and I had a lot of good times. Retired, we've just been busy. We've gotten involved with the Forest Service, doing volunteer work with the Forest Service. I think we've been out to Montana for nine times, West Virginia a couple of times, Virginia once. We're active in the church, active in the high school sports program.

GASPER: Here at the Union Methodist Church where we are today.

WOODFORD: Yes. I've been in the choir, let's see, I've been 43 years in the choir.

GASPER: I just want to make sure I say that one more time. Union United Methodist Church here in Belleville, Illinois. OK.

WOODFORD: And I'm working part-time at Border's Books & Music twenty hours a week which I really enjoy, I just

GASPER: I remember beside from your very talented craftsmanship that you also have a very impressive collection of stamps which I believe is focused on helicopters, is that right?

WOODFORD: Yes, they have, what do they call it, inventory or whatever; they say it's supposed to be the world's largest collection of stamps with helicopters.

GASPER: And in fact, what, you get invited to various meetings, conferences because

WOODFORD: I've been invited back to Washington, D.C. three times to the American Helicopter Society annual forum. I was in Montreal two years ago. I'll be going back to Montreal this year to have them on display. It's just a fantastic opportunity. You meet a lot of great people.

GASPER: Well, I'm sure, and you continue to add to that collection as things

WOODFORD: Right now, probably about fifty-three that I don't have, that I'm aware of.

GASPER: Well, I'm sure there's any number of places that would love to have that on display on a permanent basis, if you'd ever feel like you'd want to or however you might have that.

WOODFORD: Well, the American Helicopter Museum in West Chester, Pennsylvania would like to have it.

GASPER: Well, that sounds like an ideal place.

WOODFORD: And I'm working with an attorney, you know, as far as the details. I want to be sure, you know, if I decide to go that way that they're protected, their taken care of and, because, you know, nobody around Belleville here is really too excited about helicopter stamps. 'Bout the time I get them, put 'em on display is at a worldwide convention.

GASPER: Well, that's quite a feather in your cap to have something that, that unique that is certainly prized by the aviation community and myself included. Well, something else, I'd appreciate your insights about is, of course, you are a part of what's been termed the "Greatest Generation." Tom Brokaw's book, basically as I understand it, generation that had the trials of the Great Depression, and fighting tyranny in World War II, and banding together to not only defeat the tyranny, but to then build a very prosperous America that many people should be so thankful for today, and not take for granted. I'd be interested to hear your views of, in your own words, what you see as the contribution you made, and to maybe what you describe as the contribution of your generation to America today and for future generations?

WOODFORD: Well, I believe in a good strong work ethic. I think if somebody hires me, I mean, I owe it to them to give them the best I have. I know my dad always told me, if I'm going to do, attempt a job, do it the best I can, or don't try. I just [unintelligible] be honest, you know, we came through some rough times, but we didn't know we were poor, everybody was in the same situation. We had a good childhood. I had strong parents and we've tried to bring up our son and daughter in the same values that we were raised. We were, you know, I think we were just average people that believed in the country. We got active, we volunteered in civic groups, church groups, and did what we could, maybe make our little old community maybe a little bit better place than what it was before we came on board. But I think a lot of it goes back to the strength that our parents, and my wife's parents instilled on us, you know, when we were growing up and going through grade school and high school.

GASPER: Very good. I would be interested to hear, of course, we're about two months here, after the fact of those very horrific attacks on 11 September by terrorists at the World Trade Center; and the slamming jets into there as well a jet into the Pentagon; and another jet that apparently the passengers on board were fighting for control, went down in Pennsylvania. And of course, you were alive to also witness the awful events of Pearl Harbor. Could you tell me a little bit about how you see those two events – well, first of all, how you heard the news for Pearl Harbor and then 11 September; and how you see those very significant events in American history?

WOODFORD: Well, Pearl Harbor, I didn't realize that had been bombed. I was out in California flying sailplanes. We came back into Glendale that evening, and we'd heard about it. And it really bothered, really upset me that somebody could do that, you know, so unexpected and at that point in time. I didn't think, you know, it was supposed to happen. The World Trade Center, I looked at that television and I just couldn't believe, you know, what I was witnessing. I just couldn't imagine how anybody could have such hatred toward anybody or anything to do what they did and to take so many innocent lives. And I just, you know, I still can't, I can't comprehend that, my wife and I, I think we're looking over our shoulder now – we go into a restaurant, I think we're a little suspicious, you know, if we see somebody of a different color. We're more cautious, we're more aware, and I still can't understand how anybody can be brainwashed into that type of a lifestyle, to know that you work for four years and eventually just so you can commit suicide.

GASPER: Yes, well, I certainly share a lot of those sentiments. It's, of course, I can't speak to how I took the news of Pearl Harbor of course. Just kind of, this is a minor point, but you said you were flying sailplanes when you – you mean gliders?

WOODFORD: Yes. I was working for, you know, I went over and helped up one of the instructors at the school I was going to on constructing sailplanes. He designed and built his own and so as far as to pay me, why we would, he let me go up and show me how to, you know give me instruction on sailplane flying. That's where I was the day of Pearl Harbor.

GASPER: I see. You came back and heard the news on the radio?

WOODFORD: Yes, heard it on the radio.

GASPER: Well, you know, I'd say we're coming down on the last few minutes of tape here, so I guess this would be probably a good opportunity to ask you if there's anything else you would like to add, maybe anything we didn't address or issues that you think someone who has an interest in the air war in Europe or any other topics that we've discussed, or maybe haven't discussed, that you would like to add to this oral history session.

WOODFORD: Well, I didn't realize until about the last eight or nine years how expendable we were in combat. That bothered me. I read a book not too long ago, that the Eighth Air Force was nothing but decoy to, you know, get the fighters up. You know, from what you read, the destruction we did wasn't all that great, and that really bothered me because a lot of innocent people went to their death on that. I mean we were believing, you know, that we were really contributing to the war effort and then have it come out that, you know, that we were using as decoys and stuff like that. That has really bothered me.

GASPER: Now you mentioned you read a book, what book?

WOODFORD: I don't know which one it was. It was a, oh, I've got it at home, but it really bothered me that, it was quite a thick book. It was a history of the air war in Europe, and basically what this author's point of view was that we were flying to get the Luftwaffe up so we could take care of them.

GASPER: Do you remember the name of the author?

WOODFORD: I could sure get it, yes; I just, of course, I can't, I don't know what it is now. You know, they told us after the Schweinfurt raid that we shortened the war effort – I don't know by how many months – and about sixty days later, they were backed up doggoned near full production. You know, we got a citation and everything like that, so you know at that time, you didn't think about it. But you look at it now, you know, you just wonder. But we never questioned any of these decisions, you know. We did what we were told, and no griping or anything like that.

GASPER: Well, for my "two cents", I have heard some of that sentiment, that the Eighth Air Force, and other bomber units helped to draw the Luftwaffe into combat to help hopefully through increasing attrition, win air superiority. Although you know, I for one would not say you were simply a glorified decoy of sorts, and that it's, the debate still rages today through assessments and to what extent, you know, that the US Strategic Bombing Survey, that assigning certain measures of credit to this or that factor for helping to win the war and that that will continue to be a source of debate. And very difficult to be absolutely definitive about who did what and to what extent when there were so many involved. Of course, this isn't my oral history interview, it's yours, and I just wasn't sure if there was anything else you might have wanted to add.

WOODFORD: Yes, there's so many books coming out now, you really don't know what to believe. I mean, I still believe, I want to believe that we contributed to the war effort; I mean, I feel we did. The measure of success, I don't know, but I think we did what we were asked to do and we did it the best way we could and nobody can take that thought away from me, regardless of what they write. We had a lot of good men and it was a great time. I don't know if I qualify that great – it was a time I would not want to go over or through again, but I'm very grateful I had the chance to do it because I found out, you know, my capabilities of what I could handle and what I couldn't handle. I just regret I wasn't able [END OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW ON TAPE 1 OF 1, SIDE B].

[INTERVIEWER'S NOTE: While the tape ended at this point, Mr. Woodford stated the following words to complete his thought above, and approved the wording for inclusion in the transcript; he saw no need to continue taping as he viewed this thought as his concluding remark:] "... to complete my tour of 25 missions along with the rest of the crew who all finished their 25 missions, and got their DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] – the highest award to me; Lindbergh my idol got it, so if I could be awarded the DFC that would've been the highlight of my career."

[INTERVIEWER'S NOTE: In conclusion, as the interviewer, I expressed my great thanks to Mr. Woodford for his time and willingness to share his experiences so that this oral history may be archived for reference by historians, student researchers, and other interested persons of current and future generations.]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]