

Robert Finley

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Question: The first thing that I have you do is just give me your name, first and last and the spelling so I have that on videotape. So if you could go ahead and do that.

Answer: Yes, my name is Robert C. Finley, F-I-N-L-E-Y.

Question: Great.

Answer: I live in Lacey.

Question: Well to start with here, you're in Army Air Force, and when did you join?

Answer: Well, I, let's see, that would be 1943. Graduated in February of '44 -- graduated from cadets, that is, and I was in about a year in the cadet training program.

Question: Was that before flight school or --

Answer: Yes. I went -- I graduated from Vancouver Washington High School in 1941 and went to Pullman, to Washington State College. In those days it was called college.

Question: Hm-hmm.

Answer: Now it's Washington State University. And I was there about a year and a half and of course in the meantime there was Pearl Harbor and everybody was being called out for something and I knew that I -- I took ROTC when I was there and I knew I didn't want to be in the Infantry. So I applied for aviation cadet training program and fortunately I was able to pass the test. And so then I was called up in February of '43 and sent down to Santa Anna. Or sent down first of all to -- Fresno, California, for basic Army training, KP and marching and that sort of thing. And then they decided they would send us, rather than send us down to Santa Anna, they would send us to a college training detachment. And we took an examination -- we were put in either a two, three, four, five or six month program. And I happened to be, because I had college background, I was put in the two month class. And was sent back up here to Ellensburg to college training detachment. I was there for two months, then sent down to Santa Anna and they decided to make a -- an experimental squadron of us. And so instead of having nine weeks of pre-flight, we had three weeks. So they slowed us down in one case and they speeded us up in another. And so I was in the three week class. We took our preflight training there. And then I was sent to -- do you want me to go on with --

Question: Oh, no, just keep on talking, I'll interject when I --

Answer: All right, fine.

Answer: Then I was sent, my first base for flying was over at Tucson, Arizona. Ryan Field. And we flew the PT-22. And I had about 60 hours of PT-22 training there. And we had ground school as well which was aircraft recognition, Navy recognition and oh, Morse Code, few things like that, navigation, little bit of navigation.

Question: When you were back at WSU, was that when Pearl Harbor was -- was at that time?

Answer: Right. It was WSC at that time.

Question: WSC. Did you -- do you remember that day?

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Answer: I remember that day very well. I played in a dance band in -- when I was -- played saxophone and clarinet. And Saturday nights we played until one or two o'clock or I didn't get to bed till two or three o'clock so I was -- I slept in on Sunday morning. And about 10:30 or so I came down the stairs in the fraternity house -- I was a Lambda Kai Alpha fraternity, and all the fellows were lying around on the floor listening to the radio. And they said the Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor. I said what or where is Pearl Harbor? I -- I didn't know where it was. Then I finally became educated in it. And so we sat around, listen to the news broadcast --

Question: So you sort of -- was there some disbelief when they said that or --

Answer: Well, I -- yes and it just didn't have any -- I didn't know what to expect -- I'd never -- never been in that position before, you see. But shortly thereafter, of course they had the draft and they had a lot of other things. I'd go to class and the next day some of our fellows would be gone, and in the fraternity house, we'd get greetings from the president, you know, that sort of thing. So I --

Question: So what was Pullman like at that time, right after the -- Pearl Harbor -- did things change?

Answer: Well, fellows were -- were getting called up, and of course they -- they decided to increase the ROTC work that we had. We had a -- we had an hour in the morning, I think seven to eight o'clock. Used to be half an hour, three days a week and then it turned out to be an hour, five days a week. Mandatory.

Question: So you had more and more military then?

Answer: Yeah, and I decided with that that I didn't want to be in the Infantry. And I knew I'd be drafted so I decided I'd try for the aviation cadet training program.

Question: So when you finally got into your flight training, when was it that -- another man I talked to that flew Marauders said that at a certain point they asked him what type of aircraft he wanted to fly. Did -- were you given that option?

Answer: Well, yes and no. All along the line, from the very first, they -- they wanted to know if we wanted -- first of all if we wanted pilot training, navigation or bombing. And if we wanted flight training, do we want -- did we want single engine or multi-engine. And I always put single engine flying and I got it. But I know some of the fellows that put single engine and they got twin engine, or they -- somebody wanted multi-engine and they got single engine. So --

Question: Yeah, this gentleman picked P-71's --

Answer: I think they -- they gave you a choice, but they put you where they want you.

Question: Yeah. This gentleman picked P-51's, he ended up with Marauders.

Answer: Well I didn't -- I didn't have a choice on -- on specific aircraft, but I did ask for single engine land aircraft and I did get it.

Question: How long did your flight training take from start to finish? Was it long or --

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Answer: I went in and it took about a year, with the college training detachment. But then as I say we speeded up in -- in the preflight. So it took about a year. I -- I graduated February 8th, 1944. And then they sent -- sent us down to -- oh, they gave us a leave and then they sent us down to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And while I was there I went through a -- a physical and they claimed that I had a hernia and I'd have to have an operation. So I had the operation. And then they -- in those days they kept you in bed a long time. I couldn't even raise my head off the pillow for a week, and I had to stay in the hospital three weeks. Now, you know, they get you up right away. But then they gave me a four week leave, I think it was, so I decided I wanted to try to hitchhike by air from Louisiana back to Vancouver, Washington, my home.

Question: Did you make it?

Answer: Yeah, well, partly. And I went down to the flight line and I found that there was a colonel that was going to fly a -- what we called an SP2C plane north. And so I got ahold of him and asked him if I could get a ride. He said you got a parachute? I said I'll get one. So he said well meet me down at the flight line tomorrow morning. So I went down and scrounged a parachute from somebody. I don't know how I did it but I did. And I met him down there at 8 o'clock. We got in this SP2C and went north to Leavenworth, Kansas. And we went into a mess hall there and about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and we had lunch. So he kind of lit a cigarette and kind of stretched. He says, well, I think I'll take a shower and go to work. And I said what do you do here, Colonel? He said, "I'm the CO". So he was the CO of the staff in command school, which is all of your officers before they can go up to the general rank, have to go through this staff in command school, and he was the CO and I was -- I was a little bright gold bar second lieutenant riding with the colonel of the head of the staff of command school.

Question: So did you get another flight from there to --

Answer: Well, yeah, he sent me into town with some doctors there -- they had a party that night in one of the hotels with some girls. And I didn't participate, but the next day he said you'll be best to go off out of -- out of Kansas City, Kansas, I guess it was. So I went across the river and got in -- got to the airport, and there was a flight that was going out to Colorado Springs. So I hitched a ride on that. Got to Colorado Springs. They said there's no flights going out of here. You might go up to Denver, maybe get a flight. So I took a bus up to Denver. And then got a flight with a C-47 that was going to Great Falls, Montana and from there up to Alaska, from there over to Russia. So I got off at Great Falls and checked in there. They said there's nothing going west out of here, so I got a bus and came on down to Vancouver by bus.

Question: How long did it take you from start to finish?

Answer: Oh, from start to finish?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: About three days.

Question: That's not too bad. So you had four weeks leave?

Answer: Yeah, hm-mm. Then I went back by train. And went back through Los Angeles. Taking flight training -- or when I was a cadet, I met a girl at the Hollywood Canteen and got pretty well acquainted with her and we danced and I fell in love with her. So I asked her to

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marry me. We were married, after, well, that was a little later on, we were married up in Nebraska.

Question: So you spent part of your leave in LA then?

Answer: Yeah.

Question: So did you see your mom and dad up here in Vancouver, still and --

Answer: Oh, yeah, I came home.

Question: Your mom know you were coming home or did you surprise her?

Answer: Oh, yeah, she didn't know when, but she --

Question: Happy to see you?

Answer: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Question: Pretty worried about you, probably huh?

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Huh.

Answer: Especially later on when I was overseas, of course. My dad has been a mechanic as one of his jobs in his life so he was -- he was asking me about mechanical things on the plane. I was surprised how educated he was. In aircraft and aircraft engines. He must have read about them when he -- when I was in the service, he must have --

Question: Read up on it --

Answer: Read up and was interested.

Question: And some contact with you --

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Do you remember saying goodbye to your mom, then, was that the last time you saw here before you shipped overseas or was that another time?

Answer: I'm sorry --

Question: Did you see your parents before you shipped overseas, or was that --

Answer: No, that would be the last time before I was shipped over.

Question: Did they know that they might not see you again or --

Answer: Well, they knew that I was --

Question: Due to go?

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Answer: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Question: So was your mom pretty --

Answer: Oh, yeah, she was -- I think most moms are, you know.

Question: Do you remember her seeing -- did she see you off at the train or --

Answer: I think my -- I think my dad took me over to Portland to get on the train rather than down at Vancouver. And I think my mother -- I think my mother stayed home. She didn't want the --

Question: She didn't want that last minute --

Answer: Yeah, yeah.

Question: So you remember that, when you walked out the door?

Answer: So I got on the train and went down to LA and saw my girlfriend and then went back to Baton Rouge and then went through some more testing and then they finally sent us up to Bruning, Nebraska, to start learning to fly P-47's. And while we were there, they had us lined up alphabetically and they says count off by ten, so we counted. He said this ten will be with one instructor, this ten will be with another. So I -- I didn't know any of these fellows that I was with but we became very well acquainted and very close. And after our period of -- of -- well, during our course of training there with the P-47, we had a hundred and -- I think we had a 120 hours of P-47 training there at Bruning. One of the -- we were sent up to Sioux Falls, South Dakota for gunnery. And one of the fellows was on a gunnery mission one day, a ground gunnery mission, and he failed to pull up. And he flew into the target and was killed, so that left nine of us together.

Question: Had you know him a long time by then or --

Answer: No, we just -- just had met. And -- but we became very close friends, the nine of us. And on the train going back down -- we had to go back down to Baton Rouge, and we would sit up in the train and we'd sing and we smoked and we'd tell jokes and we got very well acquainted. We -- we really bonded. And so we called ourselves the Blue Flames because we were such hot pilots, you see.

Question: So did the -- so you went out on town together --

Answer: Oh, yeah.

Question: So for you, it's probably the first time you've seen a lot of the country, I suppose?

Answer: Oh, yeah, for most of us.

Question: What was Baton Rouge like for all nine of you?

Answer: Well, it was loaded with soldiers and it wasn't much of a -- wasn't a very good town.

Question: Not very good town to go out on leave?

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Answer: No, went down to -- to New Orleans, however. That was only --

Question: You must have liked that if you were --

Answer: Yeah, we went down to New Orleans a few times. That was -- that was kind of nice.

Question: Being a saxophone player, you must have liked --

Answer: Oh, yeah.

Question: -- the jazz of New Orleans.

Answer: Yeah, I got a chance to see some of that.

Question: Did you ever play down there when you were --

Answer: No, no, I played on the boat going overseas. They got a little pick-up band together and we put on a show for all the GIs that, you know, just to kill time. We put on three shows a day, I think, for the ten days that we were on board the ship.

Question: Did you take your own saxophone?

Answer: No, no, they had horns on the ship. We had one fellow who was a master of ceremonies, he told jokes. And we just faked the music, somebody would dance and so we'd fake Tea for Two or something like that. And we put on -- as I say, there were quite a few -- quite a few people on that ship and probably we couldn't each -- probably only had room for maybe a hundred, so it took quite a few -- we played two or three -- two or three gigs a day.

Question: So was that -- that was the Atlantic you were crossing then, wasn't it?

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: Was the weather good or bad or --

Answer: Weather was reasonably good, yeah.

Question: Had you ever been out on ships before on the ocean --

Answer: No, not at all.

Question: What did you think about that?

Answer: Well, it was -- it was okay. We were on a -- we were on a French ship called The Columbie -- like Columbia only without the "a" on it. And we had -- I don't know about the GIs but the officers -- we had excellent French cooking, with all the -- with white tablecloth and all the silverware, the whole schmere. I think we only had two meals a day, however.

Question: Did you have your own cabin and --

Answer: With sharing with others.

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Question: Officers?

Answer: Yeah, sure.

Question: Yeah, this B-26 pilot, he was on an English ship going across there and he said for breakfast he had a cold piece of fish with cold white sauce on it.

Answer: I had no complaints about the food on the Columbie. In fact we came back on the SS United States, and the food -- we had metal trays coming back. Before we had --

Question: Place settings?

Answer: Chinaware and silver extending out both ways, you know, napkins, the whole bit. So the -- the food on the Columbie was very nice.

Question: So nine of you were on the Columbie then?

Answer: That's right.

Question: And did you -- you all stuck together through the whole time?

Answer: Well, yeah, we -- when we got to Liverpool, no, not -- we didn't go to Liverpool, we went to -- Edinburgh or Glasgow, Glasgow, I believe it was. And we got on a train and came on down to, oh what as the name of that, Crewe, C-R-E-W-E, I think it was. And there was kind of a -- a staging place and from there we went to Shrewsbury and while at Shrewsbury we got a chance to fly eight or ten hours of P-47 and we got some other -- we got some shots and some other things that -- we spent three or four weeks there. And then they sent us down to Portland, I think it was, down in the southeast coast, and we were there just a short while. And then they put us on this ship that went across over to Omaha Beach.

Question: Did you get to see part of England before --

Answer: I'm sorry?

Question: Did you get to see any of England before you -- A,. Not much. We --

Question: Going to go on down and --

Answer: No, we went down to Wales and had a -- had some aerial gunnery, or some ground gunnery down there in the ocean. But we didn't get out of Shrewsbury very much.

Question: When you got to Omaha Beach, how long after the invasion was that?

Answer: Hundred and -- D plus 120.

Question: So how far had the -- the Americans advanced by then?

Answer: We were up around the Maginot line.

Question: So you arrived on the beachhead and --

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Answer: We, yeah. We came in on small boats and I guess it as LST's or something like that. And no, we came in on a larger ship and I don't know what it was but it dropped - dropped it's front and we were able to walk off without getting wet. And they walked us up the hill. We got -- got our -- had our luggage, and we were about to go up the hill and they had us stop there. And we saw a truck coming down, GI truck, with a canvas canopy on it, and there were three or four Germans in there in the back with POW on it -- on their arms. And so they picked up our luggage and put it in the truck and then climbed in the truck and they took off and went up the hill. And we had to walk up the hill. (laughs) So we say, big deal, the Germans that we captured, they get to ride, we have to walk. (laughs) So we griped about it.

Question: That was probably the closest -- is that when you really -- seeing Omaha Beach, was there a lot of battle damage there and --

Answer: Well, we couldn't tell there was battle damage. Rocks and sand and so forth.

Question: But you really knew that you were in the war or whatever --

Answer: Well, we knew we were -- we were -- we were in the combat -- close to the combat zone.

Question: So did -- you must have been days within going into combat at that point?

Answer: Well, a little, a few days. It was two or three weeks maybe. We went up there -- we walked up about four miles, and they had this tent city that they had that we were to stay in. It was damp and the canvas sagged and so forth. They had some stoves in there and they says over there's some wood, you can make yourself a fire. And the wood was wet and we didn't have any paper and it was kind of -- we kind of got disgusted with that. So a day or two -- we stayed there about a week and I don't know why we stayed there but we did. But anyway, this one fellow -- two of us rather -- rather there were three of us, two other fellows and myself, went out walking when we -- we had nothing to do so we went walking. And we came by a motor pool and there was a bunch of brand new jeeps and weapons carriers and other vehicles in there. So this one fellow, Joe from Texas, he was a little bolder than the rest of us -- we crawled through the fence and we walked around. And we noticed there was a bunch of jeeps being made up in a convoy to -- to go out. So Joe says let's take one of these jeeps and get on the end of this convoy. So we found a jeep with some money -- with some gasoline in it, and so when these other jeeps went out, we tagged -- Joe was driving, and we tagged on behind them. And of course the -- the guard at the gate -- the officer handed these papers to him and they saluted and they started out. And of course when we pulled up at the rear, why we saluted them and went on out too. And he didn't count the -- they had orders for 30 jeeps and didn't count that there was actually 31 or whatever the number --

Question: So you ended up with a jeep then.

Answer: We had a jeep so then we thought, well, so we started, kind of dragging back a little bit, and finally when we got to a point we turned off and skedaddled. Then we realized, hey, we've got a hot jeep here. With, you know, those numbers are painted on the side, on the hood. So we went back to our tent city and we went to the motor pool and got some tools -- we had seen a jeep had been down in a ditch, down about 20 feet into a hole down there. And it had been wrecked during the -- during the invasion. So we knew that that jeep -- the numbers had already been wiped off. So we went down and took that hood off that jeep down there and brought it up and put it on our jeep and threw our hood back down. So we had

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numbers that were already wiped out, you see. So we had ourselves a jeep. And then what we were going to do with it. So we -- we came back to camp and our -- we had an officer in charge of us there. He didn't care. He was just -- he was just one of us. He happened to be a captain or a major that had been sent over for the first time. So he was in charge, but he didn't care what we did.

Question: So did you keep the jeep all the way up to your air base or --

Answer: No, we -- we moved up to Paris and they told us tomorrow morning we're going to go to Paris to the 29th Repo Depot, whatever that is, so we drove our jeep up there and we got into town, got down the -- where the -- what they call the Com Z headquarters, where General Eisenhower was and all the other officers. We went in there, thought we'd go into the post office to find out where this 29th Repo Depot was and they didn't know where it was. We went around and finally we said well, we'd like to have a billet. So they -- they gave us a billet for the night. And we -- we left the jeep parked there in their motor pool and we took -- took the distributor out -- and -- the rotor, rather, not distributor. Told the GIs to watch our jeep. And so he says it will be safe. So they took us in a weapons carrier out to a hotel and we went to sleep. And the next morning we were walking down the street to go to -- we left our gear there and we were going to take the subway and go back down and pick up our jeep. And we happened to run into one of the fellows that -- one of our Blue Flames. He was out running that morning, and he says, oh, we're only just a few blocks over here so we -- we knew where the 29th Repo Depot was. So we took our -- we got the jeep and we came back and pulled into this motor pool they had there at this staging area. And then we checked in. And we came back down to get into the jeep to go back and pick up our gear and the sergeant came out, the sergeant of the motor pool. He says are you the fellows that brought this jeep in? And this one fellow, Joe, he says why are you asking that sergeant? He says, well, when we first came to Paris, we were assigned three jeeps in consecutive number. And he says, there -- over there is -- he says one of them was stolen. The -- like 677, 678. And he says there's 677, there's 676, there's 678, now this is 677, right here. So we -- apparently the jeep was stolen in Paris and taken down the coast and wrecked. And we picked up that hood and put it on our jeep and brought it back to the same place. And that sounds like it's a -- it sounds like it could never happen, but I saw those numbers and they were in consecutive number.

Question: So you lost your jeep then?

Answer: We said you don't know who brought that jeep in, do you sergeant? He says never saw them. Says, well, why don't you take us over -- we were playing the Army game. He knew it and we knew it. We says why don't you take us over to get our gear. So he says, sure, get in this weapons carrier. So we went over and got our gear and brought it back. We left the jeep there. We couldn't have taken it any further anyway, so it was -- it was all right. Q So then is that when you ended up getting sent up to --

Answer: Then we were sent over to Reims, France, and we flew our first mission up there.

Question: When you went up, did you -- did they send you up with experienced pilots at first or --

Answer: Yeah, we were assigned to a flight leader and this flight -- one of this -- this flight leader that I had -- he was a kind of a -- well, I thought he was kind of a SOB.

Question: So you remember that flight pretty well then, first flight?

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Answer: Yeah, I remember. His name was Sam Scalzy. He was from the -- east coast, from Boston area. And we went up and I could fly formation quite well -- I liked formation and I flew it very well. Not bragging but it's a fact. So I could tuck in there and stay. Had an excellent instructor on that. We got down, we were being debriefed, he says, Finley, he says, what was your oil pressure 20 minutes out? And I says well, it was in the green line, you know you had a green line, red line. He says no, don't say in the green line, say 52 or 55 or whatever it is. He says I want you to know at all times and when you stand on that dock in Liverpool and they call your name, Finley, and you can say here, to get on the boat to go home, you can say here, thanks to Sam Scalzy. And I thought what a poop. But I didn't say anything, of course. He was a captain and I was a gold -- gold second lieutenant.

Question: So when you had that first flight, what -- what did it consist of? Did you --

Answer: Well, my first flight, we flew to Aachen and I dropped bombs on -- Aachen, I don't remember what our -- what our target was.

Question: So did you experience flak or enemy fighters?

Answer: Oh, yeah. They got some 88 millimeter around there but it wasn't anything --

Question: No pursuing aircraft or anything?

Answer: No, it wasn't --

Question: So what did you think about the flak? Was it close or was it --

Answer: Wasn't close, that time.

Question: You saw the burst out there and -- huh.

Answer: Yeah. It -- I saw -- I got -- I saw flak later on, though, lot of --

Question: At that point it wasn't too impressive, you didn't worry too much.

Answer: Well, yeah, you've -- I was -- you knew it could knock you -- knock -- but as it turned out nothing happened and we landed and --

Question: So what did you think about that when you're flying to Aachen and you had never flown in combat -- did you have qualms about it or --

Answer: Yes, I suppose I did. I -- I've always felt confident. And felt I could do the job. And I didn't know what was coming up, and naturally I wanted to -- primarily I didn't want to foul up somebody else, you know. That was probably my main concern. And, but we -- we had practiced dive bombing and so that wasn't any big deal. We were not pinpoint bombing. I don't remember now what we -- what we went after. Whether it was a railroad station or whatever it was, but I got in line and we went down and dropped the bomb, came back up, no problem. But I looked at my air speed indicator -- or I mean my oil pressure, oil temperature at all times, and when I got back he never asked me what my oil pressure was.

Question: So did he -- most all of the nine Blue Flames flew that day, did they, or --

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Answer: I really don't know. We -- we -- we weren't -- we weren't in the same mission cause we were in different -- different flights. But --

Question: So when was it that you -- was there a time that you went on a flight you first time that you really were -- that things were sort of bad -- that you were concerned, or --

Answer: I'm sorry. What was the question?

Question: When you went -- when you were on your flights, was there ever -- was there one flight, early on in particular that you -- that you were concerned about? That things were sort of going bad and --

Answer: Well, we -- see I got shot down on my fifth mission, but if I may go back a little bit. About the second or third mission we went out and we came back and we couldn't land at our field because the weather had socked in. So we -- we landed at a place called Charleroi -- like King Charles in French. And we pulled into this base and they said well, we just -- we just landed here ourselves. We just checked in ourselves. And he says, we -- and they were living in tents. He said we don't have any place for you. So he says we'll give you a truck and take you into town, see if we can't billet you in town. So we went into this town of Charleroi and went to the police station. There was one fellow who was a -- one of the policeman had lived in Canada. French-Canada. And so he spoke English. So we told him what our problem -- we had 36 pilots here and we needed to overnite. So he talked to his other -- other policemen and he said all right, half of you come with me and half of you go with -- Pierre -- or whoever. So we went down the street and he started knocking on doors. He would jabber and say two of you in here, and go down, three of you in here, and we came to a tavern and so there was two of us and so we went into this tavern and they had an upstairs -- they had uh, upstairs -- bedrooms upstairs. And so we had a -- we had a tavern as our upkeep.

Question: What was that like, staying in the tavern?

Answer: Well, it was noisy until -- till they closed, you know. And they had -- they had girls down there and so it wasn't too unpleasant. But we were -- we didn't get into any trouble that night.

Question: That -- where you billeted -- one of your friends from --

Answer: Yeah, one of the -- well, not one of the Blue Flames. It was -- another fellow -- he was from -- happened to be from New Iberia, Louisiana.

Question: So when you flew into this other -- I take it when the weather cleared you flew back to your --

Answer: The next morning we flew back, yeah.

Question: And then you went out on patrol again that day or --

Answer: Well not that day but -- on the fourth mission, or after the fourth mission, we moved up to Belgium, near a town called Louvain, or they now call it Leuven, L-E-U-V-E-N, it's the Flemish, and Louvain, L-O-U-V-A-I-N is the French. And -- so we were -- we were at that field and we lived in a -- in a chateau about five miles, maybe less, about three miles off the base. It had been a private chateau and then it was taken over as a -- as an orphanage for a while cause it had -- it was a big place. And then the Germans came and took it over, and then we came and took it over. And it was near a little village called Dongleberg and the --

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the Belgians called it Doan-ju-bere (Phonetic). But anyway we -- I flew my first mission out of there would be my fifth mission. And we were going to drop bombs over by the Rhine River someplace, I forget now -- oh, oh, it was the -- it was a bridge crossing the Roer, not Roer, one of the tributaries that run into the Rhine. And I was carrying a thousand pound bomb that day. And we flew out and as I -- as we were flying, everything was all clear. We came up through the clouds. We had to form in four plane flights and then fly in formation up through the clouds. And we got up -- I was -- we were about the last one off, so we got -- we got up above the clouds, a beautiful day up there. And we were heading toward our mission -- our target rather, and was flying along and all of a sudden, wham. An 88 millimeter exploded under my left wing and I started spinning down. And I was not a religious person at that time, but I said oh, God, get me out of this. And I pulled the stick back, and I had the feeling that there was a pressure on the back of my hand pulling that stick. And I -- I pulled out, and it was very unstable. So I called in and I said, and that was a miracle that I was able to pull it out. That was miracle number one. And I called in and said I'm hit, I'm going home. And immediately my ground radar, at the base, said steer two-seven-zero degrees. And I looked at my compass and I was going exactly two seven zero. It wasn't 265 or 275, it was just exactly two seven zero. And my stick was -- to fly straight and level, my stick was clear over on the right-hand side of the cockpit. And if I would try to move it very much, the -- the left wing tended to want to stall out and put me into another spin. So the leader sent my -- sent one of the fellows back to escort me. And he flew around my plane and told me that I had a hole out there big as a refrigerator. Cut my aileron cable and my pitot tube which meant that I didn't have any air speed. And I was -- I still had that thousand pound bomb on. So I -- I jettisoned the bomb and almost simultaneously there were -- Germans threw up another salvo of four 88 millimeters and they -- the two bursts -- two in front of me, and two behind me, so I was perfectly bracketed with these 88 millimeters. And I learned later that the 88's exploded in a cone upward and downward, so I was in that cone of protection, you might say. So that was the second miracle, or, well, first miracle I guess is the fact that I came out of it. Second that I was heading exactly toward home. And then that they -- they missed me on that one. And so I decided I would have to bail out because I couldn't go down through that many feet of clouds without any air speed indicator. And with about a 300 foot ceiling and a cross wind that day, it was about 25 miles an hour cross wind. So my plane wasn't stable. So I trimmed -- I trimmed -- it wanted -- it tended to want to roll to the right so I trimmed it nose heavy so that, and I was planning to get out on the left side, so that when I did, the plane would roll to the right and would -- would go down and hopefully the tail would miss me because it was only back there about six or eight feet, it seemed like. It looked pretty big back there -- as big as that cupboard there, you know. And so I -- I had my oxygen mask on, I unhooked that, I unhooked my radio, and I stuck everything down inside my leather jacket and zipped it up real tight and I had my helmet on and I tightened that down, had my oxygen mask on. So I -- I trimmed it, as I say, nose heavy, and I got up on the seat and opened the cockpit, opened the canopy and stuck my head out and everything went whoosh and it was all gone, all of this stuff. So I was there and I had started to go down and I could hear it start winding up like the old World War I movies that I saw -- how it get -- screaming, you know. So I finally -- I was going to get back in and then I decided, well, I better not. So I pushed off. And I made myself as small as possible. And after I felt that I was away from the plane -- and I couldn't see, my eyes were closed. So I pulled the ripcord and it seemed like forever -- it finally opened and I felt a (gesture) kind of a jerk, like that. And I tried to look up to see my chute and I -- I couldn't get my head up. So, you know, we had straps going across the legs and straps up over your shoulder and then there was a big buckle that went here, across here, (gestures). Well this buckle, when I landed -- or when I -- I must have been in a sitting position when the chute opened, because this buckle went up past my face and ended up behind my head. It missed me -- it could have hit me in the chin and knocked me out, you know, or take my face off or something. So I couldn't get it back over my head so I had to unbuckle it back there and bring it back here and buckle it right, and I was a little bit shaky by

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that time. So then I went down into the clouds and as I say, it was about a 500 foot ceiling and very windy that day. So when I came down, it was eerie to come down through the clouds. There was no sound whatsoever. No feeling of -- of motion at all. And I thought, I'd heard the term the Catholics use is limbo. And I says I wondered if limbo was like this. There was just nothing. No sound, no feeling, no swaying or anything. I tried to look up and see my canopy and it was -- I couldn't see it. I could see shroud lines going up but I couldn't see the chute itself.

Question: Just hanging there, huh?

Answer: Yeah. And finally I came down through the clouds, I was about 800 feet off the ground, I guess. And I was going backwards and I knew that wasn't the way to land just cause you could break your neck, you know. So we had had -- we had never had any experience in parachuting but they told us that if wanted to turn our chute, take your right hand and reach up and grab your left shroud lines, take your left hand and grab your right shroud lines, and then pull this way (gestures) and that would cause the chute to turn like this so that we would be going down facing, so that we could tumble if we had to. So I finally got -- after awhile, I got the thing around. And I was coming down and try to see where I was going. And there was a stone fence about this high and about this wide, and then there was a cobblestone road about 10 feet below the level of the ground, and then there was a two-story brick or stone house over here. And I was heading for all of that stuff. And when you got down, you could see 25, 35 miles an hour going across the ground, that's going pretty fast. And I was also going down pretty fast. So I got down within a hundred feet or so of the ground and the wind caught my chute and spun me around backwards again. So I did my shroud line bit (gestures) and I got about half way around and the chute fell forward and -- or blew forward and I came swinging down like a pendulum. And I landed on my head and shoulder. Fortunately it was November and it was wet and the field had been plowed, so I tried to grab the lower shroud lines and let the chute fall flat but I couldn't get enough pressure, strength in it. So I just dug my elbows and my knees, my toes, in the ground and I plowed up about a hundred yards of that fellow's field, and finally came to a stop. And then I felt a little bit woozy. I felt like I might be passing out. So I put my head down on the cold ground and had my eyes closed for a little bit. Then I heard talking and I heard somebody say something about "allemande". And I knew that "allemande" meant German, and I thought well -- I knew I was in Belgium. So I said -- I looked up and I said no allemande, American. And I pointed to my patch and I showed them my dog tags and so forth. And so I tried to get my -- tried to get unbuckled on my chute. And I -- I didn't have any strength in this arm (gestures) so I pointed to them and they opened -- they opened it up. And I told them to wrap it up. And they took me into this farm house. And it was -- in the kitchen, and it was about three o'clock -- three, four o'clock in the afternoon by this time. And I hadn't had any lunch, and I'd been cold and so she gave me a little shot of cognac and I took that and that was -- that felt pretty good, you know. So she filled it up again and I took it again. She wanted to do it again and I says no, Merci, and I didn't want to get drunk there, you know. And about that time a young girl came in, she was about 15 years old. And she says, she could speak English. She said my name is Mimi and my papa is the village doctor and he's coming along shortly. So pretty soon he came and I complained about my shoulder being hurt. And, of course I was carrying a 45 caliber pistol here, you see. And she very meekly, mildly says, "Would you please take off your gun" (laughs) So I took the -- took this 45 out and I -- I emptied the clip and made sure that it was -- was -- no chamber -- no shell in the chamber. And I handed it to her. I said I'll let you hold this, but I said, keep it in sight, because I'm responsible for it. But when I pulled out that 45, all the people that were standing around -- by that time there were 10 or 15 people in this little kitchen, you know, and they -- they kind of -- they started talking and kind of gave a sigh of relief. And they didn't know for sure whether I was a German or not. But anyway --

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Question: You were big news in the village, though, huh?

Answer: Oh, yeah, yeah. So the doctor -- she said well we'll take you into the hospital, Army hospital. So we walked out the door. By this time my -- my -- I was holding my arm like this and it was starting to get a little pain in here and as I went out the front door there were people standing on both sides and they were -- they were just like football game, you know, when a team comes out and everybody stands and cheers and you run through a cordon of people. And they were shaking my hand and I was trying to hold it still so that it wouldn't hurt. Finally got to car and it was -- it was the smallest car I ever saw in my life. I think it was a Citroen. It was a little black Citroen. It wasn't -- wasn't very big at all. And, but anyway, I got in the back seat with Mimi, this little girl, and her sister, and her father was in the front seat. And on the way to the hospital, it was about 20, 25 miles, I think, I think we had -- he had to get out three times and repair the tires. They blew. During the war, because he was a village doctor there, the Germans allowed him to -- to keep his car. And I think they allotted him one liter of petrol a week, which one liter is about a quart. But because he had -- he had people out in the countryside to take care of, they -- they let him have his car. And he rode his bicycle much of the time when the weather allowed. But if somebody lady was delivering at three o'clock in the morning, he'd usually take the car. But anyway, they got me to the Army Hospital there at St. Truiden, and I told them to give him some gasoline. Well I found out later on that they didn't because --

Question: What was wrong with your shoulder then?

Answer: I separated the collarbone -- came up like that. And so they had to -- the doctor taped it down this way and taped my arm up this way. And I had to carry it like that or -- I was in the hospital for two weeks, I think it was, two or three weeks. And then when he finally took that off, I couldn't get my elbow down. I mean my -- couldn't get my arm down, so I had to soak in the tub several times and keep working it and finally got it down.

Question: When you felt that first jolt, you knew that an 88 had hit your wing, what was your first thought?

Answer: Oh, God, get me out of this. That was -- that was my

Question: Didn't think you were going to make it or did you or did you think that your --

Answer: Well, I -- I was spinning down and I says oh, God, get me out of this. And I -- I pulled back on the stick and I came out.

Question: So after you hit the ground you had those two cognacs and you were taking you to the hospital -- did it finally sort of hit you, the shock and --

Answer: Yeah, I got to the hospital and I -- I guess, I don't know what they did. I guess that was when they taped it. And I went to bed and I woke up, I was tired, you know, I mean shock. And I woke up and I needed to go to the bathroom. So I asked the guy next door where's the bathroom, he told me, latrine, and I went down the hall and went in there and I was standing at the urinal and all of a sudden I started getting black and it was -- it was right on the corner and I remember I leaned back against the wall and my feet just slowly slid out from under me and I hit my head on the -- some pipes. And so I -- I tried to holler and it was like in a dream. I couldn't get any -- get any volume. So finally they -- I was able to make a noise and a ward -- ward boy heard me and came in and picked me up and walked me back to

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my bed and I was all right again, but I think that was part of the concussion, probably causing me to black out.

Question: So laying there for three weeks recovering, you probably had lots of time to replay the whole --

Answer: Oh, yeah.

The first thing I wanted to do was to write letters to my wife and to my mother cause I didn't want them to get a telegram from the government where, you know, greetings, because my mother might have had a heart attack you know, you get a War Department telegram, you know. Those are pretty serious in those days. So I wrote right away and got letters out to them.

Question: So you heard from your -- you were married by then, huh?

Answer: Yeah, I got married in Baton Rouge.

Question: So you heard -- your mom wrote pretty often, did she? And your wife --

Answer: Yeah, probably once a week or so.

Question: So then after you got discharged from the hospital, did you go back to --

Answer: Well, I went back to -- went back to the base and so they were going to send me over to England for a rest leave. And I said, I didn't -- I didn't have enough time for my flight pay. I'd like to get some flight pay, I get 50% see, flight pay, so they worked up a -- an order to put me on temporary duties and they had an L-5 pilot there flying me around for four hours so I could get four hours of flight time. And the doctor said check out whether my arm was satisfactory for flight -- for flying combat. And of course after the four hours he decided that I wasn't -- wasn't eligible for flying so he would send me over to England or a rest leave. So I was able to get my flight pay that way. You know, we took care of each other that way.

Question: So they then -- did you end up going back to your unit then --

Answer: Well I was back in my unit at that time.

Question: But after England and the rest period?

Answer: Oh, yeah. When I went -- went over to England and then we had a -- one of the fellows had -- had reached his 200 hours, and so he was, rather than to go home, they made him a -- he didn't want to go home. So they made him a C-47. We got a C-47 someplace, it's a -- you know, a transport plane. So he would transport people to, oh, down to the Riviera or he'd go over to England for a booze run, whatever. And so he came over and got me from England and -- and came back to the base. And we couldn't get -- we couldn't fly -- we couldn't land that day because planes were landing and taking off and landing and taking off. And we had to stooze around there for two or three hours and with - with report there was enemy aircraft in the area. And it was the first day of the Battle of the Bulge. So we landed and that night the weather socked in and we couldn't get off the ground for two or three weeks and it was terrible. We wanted to -- we wanted to get out there in the -- we could -- we got word, you know, that the battle was going, but we couldn't -- couldn't do anything about it. But as the weather was -- even the birds were walking.

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Question: So did you get that C-47 the same way that you got that jeep or did you actually --

Answer: No, I think it -- it was given to the squadron as transport. No, it wasn't (laughs).

Question: So during the whole Battle of the Bulge, then, you weren't operational?

Answer: Well, not -- not the whole battle. As soon as the weather was able -- clear that we could get of, we were over there like -- like bees, you know. And it --

Question: What was the state of the battle by the time you got there? Had the tide turned by then?

Answer: No, I don't think so. We were -- we were socked in for, oh, two or three weeks. And -- but when -- when we were able to get off the ground, we knocked out a lot of trucks and tanks and I think the Infantry appreciated having the air cover.

Question: So a lot of close air support --

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Yeah. So you were just saying --

Answer: We were -- go ahead.

Question: You were just in the operational area, then, you weren't -- you weren't striking targets, but the ground forces would call for help and then you'd --

Answer: Yeah. We'd go out there. In fact during that time several of the fellows, I don't mean our group but in other groups, volunteered to go up and be ground control up there. We'd get with a -- with a radio man. Because the pilots could -- could talk to pilots in their own language, where maybe a -- a GI wouldn't understand, you know. So we went up -- we were attached to an Infantry outfit or to a tank outfit or something, and we would --

Question: So you got right up on the front line then on the ground.

Answer: Yeah, yeah.

Question: Did you ever do that or --

Answer: Yeah, I didn't volunteer. I decided that I -- I would go anyplace that they wanted me to, but I wasn't going to volunteer.

Question: The -- that -- and the -- that was all pretty much ground support then, attacking tanks and the Germans and the towns and --

Answer: I'm sorry, I didn't --

Question: Did the Germans have a lot of aircraft up?

Answer: No, not a lot. We didn't -- I don't recall that we saw much enemy aircraft.

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Question: Do you remember when the first time you ran into a German pilot was?

Answer: Well the only dog fight that I got into -- I was -- first day that I came back from bailing out, first day of flying. And we went over to an airfield at Bonn and we got into a -- my -- I was flying the colonel's wing that day. So my responsibility was to protect him. And we got into a dogfight with some 109s and we were -- we were pulling -- we were making a circle to the left and we were trying -- the colonel couldn't pull enough lead to -- to get this 109, and I don't know, a 51 or a 38 came up underneath us and shot this -- shot him down in front of us. So we missed him, and then the thing was over. Those dogfights didn't last very long you know. At least, that --

Question: So when the 109 popped up on the scene, and you got in a dogfight, you was pretty much automatic from what you'd been trained about dogfights?

Answer: Yeah, it was. We just got into a circle and as I say, my responsibility was to fly the colonel's wing that day. And if another -- for example, if another ME109 came in from another direction, I'd call him and say break right and then I would take the lead and he'd be my wingman, you see. (gestures) You know, pilots always have to use their hands to talk.

Question: What was the worst thing -- what was the most dangerous thing about flying, do you think? Was it dogfights or anti-aircraft or --

Answer: We didn't get into dogfights. Our mission wasn't escort. The escort pilots got a lot of air to air combat. But our mission was ground support.

Question: So you got a lot of ground fire.

Answer: We got ground fire. We got 88's and we got smaller 40's --

Question: Is that -- you said two of your -- two of the nine, they went down and were captured, were they?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Did they -- was it ground fire that took them down or --

Answer: I, yes, yes, it was, yeah.

Question: Was it on any of your flights or were they on a different flight then or --

Answer: No, I -- I wasn't on the mission that they were -- either one of them was shot down.

Question: Do you remember what -- when they -- you got word that your friends had --

Answer: Yes. The first one was shot down on his -- either his first or second mission. It was when we were still in Reims. And then the second one was shot down, oh, about the time of the -- little after the Bulge, around the first of the year, he got hit over Bonn, I think it was, one of those places along the Rhine River, and he had to bail out.

Question: So what did you hear about it when they -- when a report came back. Did you know if he'd gotten to the ground safely or did you --

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Answer: No, he was just -- we didn't know.

Question: Just knew they were gone.

Answer: No. We didn't know till quite a bit later.

Question: So was it pretty upsetting?

Answer: Well, you know, yes. It's -- you -- you don't like to hear about it and you're sorry and -- but you go on and you have your missions to do, you know. It's --

Question: You ran into them later on, though, right, didn't they survive the war?

Answer: Oh, yes, yeah. Yeah, after the war. They came home. Fact, these Blue Flames that I was telling you about, the nine of us, we all came back. And we've -- we've maintained our connection. We've written and we've seen each other and so forth. In the meantime, several of the fellows have died. We were down, last year we had -- we're down to six, and now this year we're down to four.

Question: So how did you find out that they were still alive? When was the first time that they contacted you after they were released from prisoner of war camps?

Answer: I don't -- I don't recall that. They got home and so we -- as I say, we've kept in touch, even after we came back. Couple of the fellows were from LA area, one was from the San Diego area, I was from up here, one fellow was from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And one was from Dinuba, California. So we were scattered all over but we -- we would correspond, or we'd try to see each other, whenever we can. And next month we're having our P-47 Pilot's Association get together down in San Diego, and the remaining four of us are going to be there. Looking forward to it.

Question: Did the -- when -- when all this was going on, and being in combat and flying and bailing out, was there any great fear or was it hard -- was it something that you were highly trained for that you just --

Answer: I would say that we were all conscious of the possibility of being killed. But it's not going to happen to me. It's -- I -- I think what it is, we were -- it was normal confidence that we were trained to do the job and Lord willing, we -- we'd get the job done. I don't think any of us really -- I don't say we never had fear, but we didn't stew about it. We didn't allow it to -- to take -- didn't allow fear to take over our -- our lives. We had one fellow who -- he went on a dive bomb run and he said he saw this 20 millimeter come up from the ground and it came right up, he could see it, coming up, and it hit -- it went through his prop arc and hit the corner of his windshield, which is very thick, and it -- and there's a plastic canopy, you know, that comes up here. And broke chunks of the canopy out. Cut him a little bit. But it missed that four bladed prop and came right through and burst in his windshield. And when he came back, he was -- he was shaking. In fact we called him Shaky Lane. Name was Lane. And I don't think -- I don't think he flew after that. I think they sent him home. Course he had been there a -- before I came, so I don't know how many -- how many missions he had, but he was the only one that I know of that seemed to want to ground himself.

Question: When you got -- when the weather came down on you and you were stuck at base for three weeks, what did you do to break the monotony?

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Answer: Well we played, played cards, I learned to play bridge when I was there. We played a little poker once in awhile but not often.

Question: Didn't steal another jeep and go in town or --

Answer: What's that?

Question: Said you didn't steal another jeep and go into town?

Answer: No, we didn't. There was a little town near there, we called it Dongleberg, D-O-N-G-L-E-B-E-R-G, Dongleberg, and it was -- we lived in this chateau. Excuse me. We lived in this chateau, and it was about, oh, a half mile away with this little town. Well, many, many years later -- we used to go down there and they had a -- a room, little bit bigger than this room, and they had some kind of a hurly-gurly type of music machine. And instead of having rolls, like we have a roll player piano, it had -- it had books. And it would fold out like this, (gestures) and go through this -- it had holes in it like a -- like a player piano. And we'd stand back -- we'd take turns. We'd stand back there and we'd turn this big crank and we'd run these rolls through there and the music would play and the girls around the village would come around and we would do -- would do the -- we would do a dance. They kind of hopped around, and we called it the Dongleberg Hop. And I don't think they knew how to -- how to waltz or anything like that. So anyway, we -- we did this Dongleberg Hop. And many years later, when I -- this Mimi, this little girl that I was telling you about. We became close friends. And she visited us over here and we visited her over there in later years. And one day we went out on a drive and we happened to come through this little town. And I had asked her if she knew where Dongleberg was and she said no, I don't. So we were -- I was driving down this road, I said, you know, I think we're coming to Dongleberg. I says I think there going to be a bridge up here over a quarry and we're going to make a left turn and a right turn and we'll be in the town. And sure enough, that's what we did. And I said, and there's the tavern. And when I saw the town sign, she says, oh, you mean Doan-ju-bere (Phonetic). I called it Dongleberg, but for her it was Doan-ju-bere (Phonetic). So we -- we -- and I said, and there's the tavern we used to go to. So we pulled in there. And a man came there to -- to wait on -- a young man, 30's, 30-ish or so. And so in her Flemish she asked him if he was there during the war. She says oh, no, but Mom was here. So -- and so Mimi told her -- told him who I was and what it was. And so Momma came out, and she was so happy to see one of the boys that -- that came back. And I guess I was about the only one of the group that did come back then. And she -- through the interpreter, through Mimi, she told me that on New Years' Eve the girls had planned a party for us and they had gathered up all of their fruit that they could get, and they took all of their sugar ration and made a bunch of pies and brought it down to the tavern, figuring that we would be coming down there. But nobody came. And I told them that we had been warned that there was going to be German -- that was the time the Battle of the Bulge -- that German paratroopers were going to drop on our field and we were in alert -- we were -- (end of videotape)