

## Gilbert Langdon Sr.

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**Question:** The first thing, if you could just give me your name.

**Answer:** Gilbert, G-I-L-B-E-R-T, L. L-A-N-G-D-O-N. Senior. I guess we better put senior on there.

**Question:** Ah, you're a senior.

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Answer:** All right.

**Question:** Now you were in the Army Air Corps or Air Force? US Army Air Force.

**Answer:** Air Force.

**Question:** Air Force. How did you get in?

**Answer:** I enlisted. I went in August the 3rd, 1942, was honorably discharged September the 17th, 1945.

**Question:** So did you -- you chose that?

**Answer:** I chose it, yeah.

**Question:** -- that branch.

**Answer:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Question:** Had any of your -- your dad or anybody else been in the service, or --

**Answer:** My dad was in the -- went into the field artillery, but that's all. He and my mother were divorced and so it was kind of -- I'm not absolutely sure when he went in, but he was in the field artillery during World War II, but he was discharged as overage and grade at a point and I don't remember just what it was. So.

**Question:** Huh. How old were you when you went in?

**Answer:** Eighteen.

**Question:** So you're just a -- just a kid.

**Answer:** Well, I couldn't wait to be -- get in. I tried getting in RCAF -- they would take, in the RCAF at 16. So I left home and hitchhiked up to Canada and -- and tried to join the RCAF but they stopped me at the gate. Said you got any money, boy? And I laid a dollar bill and a quarter and a dime on the table. Me and three of these border guards was -- stood around this desk looking at that money, you know. And they said, we can't let you in. You're liable to become a public charge. We're just going to deport you, so that's how it ended. (laughs)

**Question:** So you went back and --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, I went back home. I went to work -- I worked on the Samson Navy Base until I went in the service.

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**Question:** Oh, really, what were you doing there?

**Answer:** Just labor. Yeah. It was brand new. They were just building it. Taking it -- just building it then. And so I went to work as a laborer there.

**Question:** So was that building barracks and buildings for soldiers coming in for the war or --

**Answer:** For the Navy, yeah, it was a Navy, Navy base. And I worked -- yeah, that's all, just labor. Building foundations for the first buildings. So.

**Question:** So that all was a result of -- of World War II, though?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Actually, I don't think this country was actually in war yet. We were -- I think they were anticipating war, and we were, to some extent, helping England, I think. I had a buddy that was on the Yorktown. And the Yorktown aircraft carrier was flying - - or sailing escort for some of the war material that was being sent to England and also some was being sent to Russia

**Answer:** So. But we were not in the war until, when it was December 7th or 8th of whatever year it was, I forget now. So.

**Question:** So you had decided to join prior to Pearl Harbor being bombed?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah. I desperately wanted to get in. I thought dictators sucked. I didn't have much use for the way they were behaving. And there was a lot of dictators, you know. Mussolini and Hitler and Hirohito and I forget the guy that was in charge of Yugoslavia

**Answer:**

**Question:** How come you chose the -- the Air Force?

**Answer:** I had an intense desire to fly a P-38. I could almost taste flying a P-38. To me that was the epitome of success would be to fly a P-38.

**Question:** So you got in the Service, you got enlisted, you turned -- let me guess. You turned 18 and went and signed up right away.

**Answer:** Well, I was 18 May 25th and I was in the Service at August the 3rd, 1942. So it only took a little while to get in, you know, I mean.

**Question:** Where did you do your basic training?

**Answer:** In, well, scattered around. Initially we went to a base outside of Nashville, Tennessee and then from there went to Biloxi, Mississippi, which I think was basically a basic training center at that point. And from then, they decided that they needed gunners a lot more than they needed P-38 pilots. We -- we were losing gunners left and right. And so they said you're going to be a gunner, basically. There was some testing and stuff went on in there but basically they said we need you as a gunner. So I went to also armament school, which means you learned how to put the bombs in a plane and release them and all this kind of stuff. But the bomb -- the gunner -- the armament school was in Lowry Field and Buckley Field, Colorado. And the gunnery school was in Laredo, Texas. And then we went to --

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**Question:** What did you do at gunnery school? How did they train you to be a gunner?

**Answer:** (laughs) They had what they called AT6's, which was a fighter plane, World War II type fighter plane. Advanced Training plane, they called it there. They had a pilot in the front seat and they put a gunner in the back seat with a -- kind of a thing here with a machine gun on it, you know, that you could move it around. You had to -- I had to hang my behind out of the cockpit to be able to run this thing, you know. And they had this plane out here dragging a sleeve and you shot at the sleeve with colored bullets and when they -- when everything was over, they landed the plane and counted the colors in the -- in the sleeve, and you knew whether you hit it or not.

**Question:** Is that pretty tough -- cause you're moving and they're moving --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah.

**Question:** Is that --

**Answer:** Well, I -- that's the first time I'd ever been in a plane, too. So I think we were about 3000 feet off the ground before I had enough courage to open my eyes. You know. (laughs) I mean, you know, we were in a different world. And the pilot was -- the pilot wanted to be a fighter pilot. He did not want to train me to be a gunner. He wanted -- he was trained to be a fighter pilot and they put him in this -- in this thing, flying these gunners around. And he got -- he was -- he didn't like this. He wanted to be a fighter pilot. At that point he wanted to go shoot down either a German or a Jap. It didn't make any difference who. He just needed to shoot somebody. You know, when World War II -- when the United States got in World War II, there was about ten million guys and women in uniform for the military, when they finally got done. And they were all angry at these dictators. The dictators didn't stand a chance, you know, with these people. I mean, they were mad. And I was one of them. And this pilot was one of them. (laughs) But it was kind of fun. It was a good experience. And I was a good machine gunner. I -- didn't bother me, after I got used to it, to hang my behind out and shoot at the sleeve, and I had a couple of buddies, and -- and all three of us did well with the machine guns. We -- we were good.

**Question:** Now you're kind of tall for a gunner, aren't you?

**Answer:** Well, it would depend. In some places I wouldn't be tall, but when I -- when I got the belly turret, I was tall, yeah.

**Question:** Now how did you get that assignment? And which plane?

**Answer:** B-17, F -- Model F. That's the ones that were painted green. Okay.

**Question:** Is that the one that the turret could retract in?

**Answer:** No, no, that was B-24 that it would retract.

**Question:** Oh, okay.

**Answer:** In the B-17 it hung out the bottom and stayed there. And when you landed you had to -- before you landed you had to crank the guns back up into a -- a landing position, kind of. And it was a physical crank in the turret, and you opened the door and cranked until you got the turret in a position where you could get in it. And you got in it and disengaged

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the physical crank and ran it by electricity from then on. So. And it ran good. It was a -- it was a good turret when you got used to it. Was always too small but.

**Question:** Now how tall were you?

**Answer:** I was 5'10-1/2. According to the measurements.

**Question:** Give me a kind of physical sense of how big this whole ball turret is that you're -  
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**Answer:** In that model plane it was uncomfortable for a man 5'4", you know.

**Question:** When you flew a mission, they were how long?

**Answer:** The first mission we were on I think was 12 hours. It was the longest mission that the 8th Air Force had flown up to that point. And that was to Augsburg, Germany. And we didn't know it was the longest mission they'd ever flown but that's -- that's what they told us. And it was -- it was unbelievable how long we were in the turret. And I stayed in it. A lot of guys got out when they got over the bomb target, but I never got out. I just stayed in there and took a visual picture of whatever they were bombing, if it wasn't cloud cover under you, you know.

**Question:** So for those of us that have never been in a ball turret, take me into getting in one and then what it's -- what I see when I'm in it. What do I have in front of me, around me.

**Answer:** Well you have a caliber -- you sit in a position very similar to this. Okay. And there's a round window down here, three inch thick glass, theoretically bullet proof. There's a caliber 50 machine gun alongside each leg. Okay. Caliber 50 machine gun is a big machine gun. I mean it's a big bullet, okay. Here (gesture) there's a Sperry gun sight. Okay. You look through the glass and you, with -- with one foot you regulate the hairs on this site to where you're framing a plane that you're going to shoot at. Okay. The other foot runs the intercom. Under the seat there's a -- there's a little regulator for oxygen that goes into your oxygen mask, okay. Two handles up here with a button on the end of each handle. They run the turret. Either handle will run the turret. Either button shoots both machine guns. So you can take this arm down and put it across your chest and put it in a different position for a while. Then you put it back up here and do this one. And you can scoot your behind around a little bit on this seat. Beyond that, there's no place to go. Okay.

**Question:** So what -- so you're looking forward through this Sperry sight -- is that what you called it?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** So you're looking forward to the guns or kind of separate from your body in a way where they're --

**Answer:** Well, everything is -- the gun is fixed in the turret. When you aim, you aim the whole turret, okay. You spin the turret around, it goes 360 degrees, you can spin it around and around and around. You can go up and down like this. It's regulated to where you can't shoot the ends of the propellers off otherwise you could come up high enough to shoot the ends off. You can kind of look and you can see the ends but you don't want to shoot them off. And they fixed it so you can't. You know.

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**Question:** Do you get -- cause I assume that's a pretty quick motion.

**Answer:** Oh, yeah.

**Question:** Do you get sick?

**Answer:** Well, I didn't, but I got a bloody nose once and it would run down into the hose on your oxygen mask. And you'd have to break it, keep -- so it wouldn't plug it up. You could breath, you know.

**Question:** 'Cause you're at minus something degrees, right?

**Answer:** Well, one time the navigator told me it was 68 below. I don't know. I never asked him after that. That was cold enough for me. I never wanted to know. (laughs) And a lot of our missions were flown in the winter, so it was probably colder, you know.

**Question:** So what did you have for a suit to stay warm? What was that like?

**Answer:** Well, I wore a pair of khaki -- khaki pants and a khaki shirt. And regular underwear, cause I can't wear Army wool underwear. It's terrible on me. And had a heated suit. They had two different kinds of heated suit. And one, like a pair of kids pajamas, you know, all one piece. I didn't have that kind. I had a neat kind that was a jacket and a pair of pants and two kind of slipper-like deals, one for each foot. Okay. But they wouldn't fit over my Army boots, this heated business. So I had to leave my Army boots in the plane and just put the heated thing on, or heated slipper feet on. And I couldn't fit the chute in there because there wasn't enough room for the chute. I had the harness for the chute -- it was a chest pack. And I could wear the harness and the Mae West. Mae West is a -- you know what -- a flotation thing, in case you landed in some kind of water or something. So my parachute sat over here against the side of the plane with my boots tied to it, okay.

**Question:** In your turret or up in --

**Answer:** No, no, nothing would fit in the turret, man, I filled that turret up. There wasn't -- (laughs) No, no, no.

**Question:** So, so, so what were you thinking, 'cause if you got hit --

**Answer:** Well, for more often than not, I was thinking, geez, I gotta pee. You know, one guy peed his pants, shorted out his heated suit and they had to amputate his -- his privates, you know. So it was absolutely desperate with me that I didn't pee my pants. They had a pee tube in the turret and it would had to have been a guy more well built than me to reach the pee tube. Especially cold and scared, you know. (laughs) So, you know.

**Question:** So where was that? Did that just come up between your legs then?

**Answer:** What?

**Question:** The pee tube?

**Answer:** No, it was over here on the side. And, you know, I sitting here with this heated suit and my pants and all that kind of stuff on, it just -- I'm not built right for -- for this kind of a thing. So it was a case of not peeing in the turret. That's all.

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**Question:** Cause you sound like a little sardine packed --

**Answer:** I am a little sardine packed in the turret. There was no room for anything. I could turn my head, you know, and there was Plexiglas on the side of the turret -- I could look out this side and whatever, you know.

**Question:** So you had vision left and right and --

**Answer:** Yeah, if I wanted to shoot I had to look through the Sperry -- Sperry sight. And you needed the sight. Say your plane was going, we'll say a hundred and fifty miles an hour, this way. And an enemy plane is coming at you at 500 miles an hour, okay, or 350 miles an hour, so the closing rate of speed is outrageous and the guns are only good. They say they're only good for a thousand yards, other than that they just spray, you know, and if you hit something, you're lucky. So the Sperry -- Sperry sight was that fast. It could -- if you -- if you used the Sperry sight right, you could frame your target and shoot and -- and it would automatically track the target. It -- not track it, but lead it. And so you -- you could -- you follow what I'm trying to say?

**Question:** Yeah, yeah.

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Wow.

**Answer:** So it was different. It was interesting, interesting. And then we were a good crew, okay. And we flew, of the 30 missions, we flew 27 of them in what they call Purple Heart Corner. Now when the -- when the B-17 is in a group, the planes are all stacked, staggered, okay. And there's always one, last one and the lowest one. That's the Purple Heart Corner. Ordinarily if you are attacked by an enemy formation, they would come in from that direction. Okay. Because you're more vulnerable there, that's all. Okay. And so that's why it was called Purple Heart Corner. And we flew -- of the 30 missions, we flew 27 of them were in that -- were in that corner. So.

**Question:** And I assume you had 30 takeoffs and 30 landings.

**Answer:** Oh, more than that.

**Question:** Okay.

**Answer:** We had lots and lots of them.

**Question:** Okay, I mean you had an equal number of takeoffs and landings; you didn't get shot down?

**Answer:** No, no, I -- we never got shot down, no. But we also flew -- after the 30 missions were up, we flew what they called the parrot ship for a long, long time. I don't know how many missions, but it was considered combat time because you get up here and they -- the bomb bays were full of radio equipment. And you would get up here at an elevation, say, 12 or 15,000 feet more or less over the English Channel, and fly in a circle. And you relayed the -- the message from the bomb group out here to the ground. Because it would only go in a straight line. And if the mission was out here, the curvature of the earth would shoot the

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message down. So we flew up here, and they called it a parrot ship because you were relaying the message -- being relay.

**Question:** Being relayed until it came out.

**Answer:** Exactly, yeah.

**Question:** So -- what was it -- what -- oh, let me see. Oh, I have so many questions.

**Answer:** Go ahead, lay it on me.

**Question:** Your airplane had a name, is that right?

**Answer:** No, ours didn't, but it --

**Question:** Oh, no name?

**Answer:** No, but it had a great big black cat standing on the figures 13 with sparks of fire coming out of its eyes. And we didn't paint it. Some crew got this -- when -- when you finished all your training in the States, you went to Grand Island, Nebraska

**Answer:** And sat there and waited for Boeing to deliver you a plane, okay. Every morning at 9 o'clock you had a formation. If you had a plane, you took off and went -- started your way to Europe. If you didn't have a plane, why you could party, you know, if you could afford it. (laughs) Whatever, there was no -- you didn't -- your training, for all practical purposes, was done, didn't have any use for you except to wait there for a plane.

**Question:** But you didn't party at all, did you?

**Answer:** Well, that's not exactly so.

**Question:** (laughs)

**Answer:** (laughs) Not exactly. But anyways, a crew got this plane in -- in Grand Island and had that big black cat and the figures 13 painted on the nose, each side of the nose. And it was a beautiful job. Absolutely beautiful. And when we got to, I guess it was Presque Isle, or Prestwick, Scotland, or somewhere, I forget now where, the powers that be gave us that plane. I don't know why or how it happened or whatever but that was our plane for 27 missions. The other three, our plane had been wounded so badly that it -- they couldn't fix it in time for the next mission so we -- we flew another plane, and then they fixed ours.

**Question:** Wow. So you had a brand new plane when you --

**Answer:** Brand new B-17F.

**Question:** Wow, that must be kind of a thrill.

**Answer:** Well, it was nice. It was brand new, it was painted, and -- painted green. You know how they are in the pictures. Eventually the Air Force discovered that the paint weighed 96 pounds and it created a drag with the wind so that's when they started leaving the paint off. And they were shiny aluminum. Okay. But our plane was green and stayed in the air, didn't get shot down. And it got to the point where people up here in this part of the mission

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would look back at our plane and they'd see it still there and thought everything was okay. (laughs) But I don't know.

**Question:** What's a -- take me through -- let's go through a day that you have a mission.

**Answer:** Okay.

**Question:** Take me through the day, because I want to know what you did before, how did you know what your mission was, and then tell me about taking off, what that as like. What planes and what you saw --

**Answer:** Well --

**Question:** So how did you find out about a mission? What did the day start out like? Did you know the day before or --

**Answer:** Yes. They put you up on a bulletin board, you're going to fly. And I told you I had two buddies, right? They each were belly gunners in other planes, and we all got sent to the 100th Bomb Group. All three of our planes, okay. And we arrived there about 11 o'clock at night, and didn't have the faintest idea where we were. And we were in the mess hall and they have a radio going and they have Axis Sally on the radio, and she's broadcasting from Germany all the modern Glenn Miller records -- and whatever, okay. Now she -- we didn't know where we were, okay. And she interrupted the record playing and said we want to welcome these particular crews to the 100th Bomb Group, you know, welcome to the ETO, we certainly hope that you have a good meal in the mess hall before you get killed. They were absolutely certain they were going to, you know, scare the shit right out of you. She knew where we were. What kind of communication system did they have where they knew where we were and I didn't know where we were, you know? That's -- that's phenomenal.

**Question:** So she was like Tokyo Rose --

**Answer:** Yeah, exactly.

**Question:** -- the German version.

**Answer:** Yeah, right, Axis Sally. The first mission, I'm flying, my crew was flying, my two buddies are not. In all the training, months and months of training, it never dawned on me in my naive soul, that somebody was going to shoot at me. I was going to shoot at somebody. It never dawned on me, ever. So help me, God, it never dawned on me. And now I'm flying my first mission. Takeoff is uneventful. We've taken off a hundred times in training and all this -- beautiful -- beautiful day. Clouds, fleecy white clouds, you know. Flying over the English Channel, I'm looking down, oh, man, this is the English Channel, man, this is something else, you know. Pretty soon here comes the coastline, this is France, man. We're flying over France. And this is something else. And they got our plane tucked way up in the bowels of this thing cause we're new, okay. And we moved into a barracks that only had six beds --empty beds. And I -- never dawned on me that the six guys that were in them beds the night before were no longer with us. Didn't dawn on me. Anyway, we're -- we're in France now. Maybe a hundred yards. And aircraft starts shooting. I'm looking at a B-17 down here that takes a direct hit, okay. And I watched this B-17 disintegrate, four engines, one plane, all the bombs, and ten guys, and there wasn't a piece of that plane fell out of the air as big as a leaf. I watched it. You talk about a brand new world. Now this brought the reality of this war to me like an avalanche. Like a veritable avalanche. From then on, I just spun around in my turret looking, looking. I was -- I was not waiting for somebody to come to

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me. I was going to be ready, you understand what I'm saying? And this is one reason why we were considered a good crew and were put in Purple Heart Corner because we were all sharp, the top gunner, the tail gunner, all of us, you know. So, anyway. That was the start.

**Question:** So you were what, maybe 19, 20 by this time?

**Answer:** I think I was 19.

**Question:** Nineteen. So still, I mean, you're still --

**Answer:** Yeah, just a kid. But most of them were just kids. You know. Even the pilot would be, maybe 21 or something of that nature. And my co-pilot had gone through P-38 transition school. He was a totally trained P-38 pilot and they needed co-pilots on these B-17s 'cause they were shooting them down just like they needed gunners. So they made him a co-pilot on this B-17 and he was a marvelous co-pilot. But he was totally pissed off to have all this training and wanted to fly a P-38 and now he's in this great big lumbering B-17, you know, so you know.

**Question:** And that's it. They're a work horse, right? I mean, they're steady as she goes.

**Answer:** Oh, this is some -- this is some other kind of plane, man. This B-17 is -- and you could tear it up and it still flew. It still flew. Yeah. We were on one mission to -- actually it was the -- are you -- are we --

**Question:** No, you're doing good. You're doing good.

**Answer:** It was -- I think it was the second mission the Air Force -- the 8th Air Force ever flew to Berlin. And our group put up 32 planes for this mission, okay. There's going to be about 1500 planes in the mission, and they stagger them out to where probably the whole procedure is 75 miles long, maybe. It can only be so wide if you're bombing a target. You know, it can't be any wider than the target, and they want to blow the hell out of it, so they stack planes up behind. And this -- this formation was going to be, according to the briefing, about 75 miles long. Fifteen hundred planes were going to bomb Berlin. And we had to be in between two layers of clouds at a very high altitude for a B-17 and all this kind of stuff. For whatever the reason, our 32 planes were not where they belonged. They were under the clouds. Not in between where the fighter escort was, and all the rest of these -- we were all by ourselves down here, 32 planes. And a squadron of German fighter planes attacked us and the tail gunner and I -- they attacked from the rear, and the tail gunner and I estimated the amount at 75 of these -- of these fighter planes. And then a donnybrook in the air only lasts at the very most, minutes. Because everybody runs out of gas and whatever, you know. Especially the fighter planes in those days. Well when they got done attacking us, they had gotten 26 of the 32 planes -- of the 32. And we only had two engines, both of them on the left wing. The right wing was kind of shredded, especially on the bottom side. And we had shot down -- our plane had shot down seven fighter planes that day. And the pilot and co-pilot did as magnificent a job of flying as you ever saw. To keep this plane from spinning around in a circle and going down on only two engines. And eventually the third -- one engine on the other wing came in because it was the supercharger that had been shot out -- not the -- not the engine itself. So it started to work again. And that balanced it out where it's a lot easier to fly it on three engines than it is on two. Especially when the two are on one wing. So anyway we started home and we were alone because we had slowed down because of the two wings -- so now we were all alone. But nobody ever attacked us again. That group of planes ran out of gas -- that was attacking us. And they had to go down and refuel and by the time they got refueled, why we were out of -- out of range, you know. They never came back

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up again. But we -- we had -- it was -- it was different to land on the base and be the last of six planes to come down. And everybody had thought we'd never going to come back. They'd already been in the barracks and started gathering up our belongings. And it was different, it was different. It was as close as I've ever come, I think, to being killed, was that mission.

**Question:** What about your buddies?

**Answer:** Well, they both got shot down. I don't know whether they're alive or dead. One of the guys was married and -- and had three beautiful daughters. He was mostly Indian and he was from a little town in Georgia

**Answer:** He had a beautiful blond wife, according to the pictures anyway, and three beautiful daughters. And I wrote her once, I said I didn't know whether he was a prisoner of war or dead, but you know, if I could help her any way at all, just to let me know and I would. But I don't know -- I never heard anything since then.

**Question:** Is -- and that must have been some of the -- the tougher part, to come back to the barracks, because that's where everybody's bunks and pictures --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah. We didn't know that when we got in. See, there's six enlisted men and four officers on a crew. The officers sleep in the officers barracks and the enlisted men sleep in the enlisted. So we got in this barracks and there's six empty beds. Well, that's lucky that there's six, cause there's six of us. Well, we didn't realize was that those six guys had flown that day and not come back. We were filling up their beds, you know. And before we got to fly our first mission, another crew from that barracks went down. By that time we had got to know these other six guys, you know. So now, you're, you know, it's a -- it's difficult to -- to ... You know, these two buddies of mine waited at the tower for us, for me to land. And then they wanted to know when we were -- when I was taking my guns out of the plane and all that kind of stuff, what was it like, what was it really like? And I had to tell them what it was really like. And one day, this one kid from Georgia flew and the Indian and myself did not fly that day. So we waited at the tower for him to get in. And when he didn't come back, he and I cried, okay. And then one day he flew and I didn't fly and so I waited for him at the tower. And he didn't come back. And I cried again. Then I quit crying. You know. When you live through it, you say, well, there's a different thing. You become inured to death, in a certain sense. It's just as scary, but you say, rather than, I don't know how to explain this. You consider yourself lucky that you are still alive, and that's as far as you can go with it. They used to tell us, when they'd brief us in the mornings, that your life expectancy in combat is 17 seconds. That ain't very long when you're 19 years old. Especially when you have lived the life a 19-year old lived before World War II. Now the kids 19 years old know 40 times more about living than -- than I knew, you know. I mean, this is a much faster paced world. You know, if somebody smoked a marijuana cigarette when I was a kid, they were ostracized from society. Now everybody smokes the damn stuff except me. Well, not everybody, but one hell of a lot of people do, you know? They bring cocaine into this country by the ton anymore, so, it's a different world, you know.

**Question:** So for all intents and purposes, you were a little boy?

**Answer:** Absolutely.

**Question:** Comparatively.

**Answer:** Absolutely. When I got home, I was still 20 years old, decorated with all kinds of ribbons and medals and all that kind of stuff. And I wanted to get married. I had to get my

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mother's permission to get married. I couldn't vote. And I used to -- they used to take me to bond rallies. When I came home on this particular leave the war was still going on, you know. We -- we got home because President Roosevelt made a point system. If you had so many points, you could get home. And I had all kinds of points, lots more points than you needed. So I was home. And they'd have a -- a savings bond rally, you know, and they'd invite me. I'd go to the savings bond rally and, look at -- here's, you know, all the medals and all that kind of stuff. Buy bonds, and all that kind of jazz. It was remarkable. It was interesting. It was fascinating. And it was bewildering at the same time.

**Question:** Because you were revered?

**Answer:** Basically a lot of people did, you know. You were a hero. I didn't think I was a hero. I thought I was just lucky to be alive. A lot of people thought I was a hero. I got the letter from the mayor and a medal from Governor Dewey who was the governor of New York at that time. You know, all this kind of stuff. And I had to get permission from my mother to get married. I always thought that was bewildering, you know, is -- I couldn't vote yet. You had to be 21 to vote. (laughs)

**Question:** Now you flew out of where -- where was your -- the base that you flew out of?

**Answer:** Thorpe Abbots, England.

**Question:** England.

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** And which squadron?

**Answer:** That was the Hundredth Bomb Group, and they had four squadrons, I was in the 350th Squadron. Hundredth Bomb Group -- it's called the Bloody Hundredth. We have a book here on it. It was -- that was one time it was wiped out and it was wiped out a couple other times, too. It was -- we had "D" on -- a big "D" on the tailboard -- on the tail -- tail of the plane. It was "D" for dollar. That was the call sign. And we -- the slogan was "D" for Dollars -- Dollars to Donuts you don't come back. I mean, it was -- it was that kind of a group. And we used to think that the enemy when they were out here beyond machine gun range, they'd fly along this 75 miles of B-17s until they found the planes with the big "D" on them and attack them. Because they were totally pissed off at the Hundredth Bomb Group. (laughs)

**Question:** What were your targets? What are some of the targets that you had to --

**Answer:** Well, Schweinfurt was a big one. That was one of the most heavily protected, and that was a ball bearing factory. And everything ran on ball bearings, you know, that was -- that was a bitch of a target. And Berlin, just for general principles. They had 1200 mobile 105 millimeter cannons in Berlin to protect it, among other things, among the permanent emplacements, you know. So, and in case you wondered about it, you can be up here looking through your little window down here at 105 millimeter canon and they shoot it up in the air and it's like a pencil line coming up (gestures). And you don't see an actual bullet, but it's like a pencil line. And just hold your breath 'cause they time it, you know, to go off at a certain point. It's an anti-aircraft shell, so there's a German plane flies out here, out of range of your mission, okay. When you go over a bombing target, it goes on automatic pilot so the bomber does not fluctuate in speed or elevation or nothing. So the Sperry site that the bomber, bombardier has, has a better chance to be accurate, okay. So this pilot out here, he says well these dudes are flying at 21,400 feet and they're going a hundred and fifty miles an

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hour. Everything is timed down here, okay. And you can fly, and at a certain point it looks like you're flying into a black thunder cloud, with anti-aircraft shells exploding. And if you get through that, you're lucky. And like my pilot says, Gil, we were awfully lucky. And we were lucky. We were good, but we were also lucky. We don't -- you don't have any defense against anti-aircraft. You know, especially on a bombing run. So, you know, you had to be lucky. We were lucky.

**Question:** 'Cause their goal -- see, now I'm starting to learn this. I used to think their goal was to hit you, I mean they'd be glad if they hit you. But really they're launching flak in the air, is that what --

**Answer:** Flak, yeah, flak. It was so thick you could almost -- there was a joke, you could fly on it. It was thick enough you could get out and walk on it. And I've watched it pop the rivets out of a plane, you know, with the explosion. Three times my little window glass got cracked where they had to put a new one in, you know, when we got down. So, you know, the flak was a bitch. It was something else.

**Question:** So it would just shred your plane then?

**Answer:** Everything, everything, yeah. Absolutely. It was much more effective as -- as shrapnel than it was as a bullet.

**Question:** So it could -- that would explode and then as you flew into it --

**Answer:** Exactly. Especially -- yeah, right. Especially when this guy out here has said, you know, and they have timing devices on the bullet and on the gun and all this kind of jazz. They just fly -- shoot it up there and let you fly into it. So --

**Question:** And they were good -- their technology was fairly good it sounds like.

**Answer:** Oh, they were good, yes. There's sometimes, when I think about the whole thing, I'm not too sure that we didn't just out produce them is how we won the war. You know, when you can fly a mission and shoot down -- they shoot down 26 B-17s in one day and 260, 10 men to the plane, that's 260 very highly trained people. You know. It took them, I forget, nine months or something to get me to where they thought I could do my job. I don't know how long it took to train the pilots and co-pilots and bombardiers, navigators. So, you know, I don't mean that we -- we could -- I think that we could -- the fact that we could mass produce the material that we used in World War II faster than they could destroy it helped get this damn thing going. Because actually the Germans had made Europe into a fortress. You know. And Dwight Eisenhower damn near called off D-Day. With a -- with a group on, I think it was Omaha Beach, but I've forgotten now for sure. But they couldn't get in. They couldn't get where they wanted to go. They were being held on the -- just pinned down on the beach. And the Rangers had orders, you know, no prisoners, and I have a Ranger friend that said it was terrible to have a German walk up to him with his hands in the air to surrender and he had to shoot him. Because you couldn't -- there was no place to put prisoners, you know. The body was covered with American dead as it was, you know. I've heard that the sand was running red. I don't know whether that was an exaggeration or not, but it was probably pretty red. But anyway they -- they finally got started in there.

**Question:** Do you remember your -- cause you talked about your baptism, where all of a sudden you realized that my God, they're going to be shooting at me.

**Answer:** Yes.

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**Question:** Do you remember seeing your first plane coming at you

**Answer:** Absolutely.

**Question:** What's that like?

**Answer:** Well, you get trained to shoot in short bursts with your machine gun, because as the gun shoots, it kicks and when it kicks it gets off the target. So you're supposed to -- three round bursts. I forgot that rule with the -- (laughs) I just shot. And I got the plane. Yeah, so, anyway, it worked. But --

**Question:** Was he close?

**Answer:** He got pretty close, yeah, he got pretty close.

**Question:** Basically if he's coming on or beside you, you're going to track him and try to --

**Answer:** Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, you don't be in one position. You're moving constantly, constantly. Because, well, obviously the closing rate is -- is outrageous, you know. So, even if he comes in from the back, he's moving at up to 500 miles an hour, you know. So, and they were -- there was a lot of them were damned good pilots. Lots of them were. You know, they got their training in the Spanish Civil War on the -- on the side of Franco, and our -- a lot of our pilots got their training with the AVG or whatever they called it. They had a volunteer business kind of like the Flying Tigers in World War II. Okay, there was -- there was a bunch of Americans flew for the free Spanish whatever they were over there. And they got their training, you know. But some of those German pilots were -- they were outrageously good, man. And they certainly had a lot of nerve. You know. They blew the shit out of England. They blew up everything they could get to. And England, you know, London encompasses 54 square miles. You could be in London, say at a hotel or in a bar someplace, and they blow the hell out of someplace down the street here, all you could hear is the noise. You never -- never know it was happening except for the noise, you know. It's a -- it's a big place.

**Question:** Could you see pilots or was it just a plane that was in front of you? I mean, is it -- is it that close --

**Answer:** Well, on this mission over England that time where there was -- where there was so much shooting going on, totally by accident there was three German planes, basically underneath me, shooting at a B-17. Kind of like, almost in a row. And so I shot down on them. Which is -- that makes them terribly, terribly vulnerable. To shoot down on them. Because their wings are right out there in front of you, their engine is right in front of you, the cockpit is right there. The plane is bigger in that position than any other position. And I -- I got glimpses of -- of pilots. So.

**Question:** Is that -- as a 19-year-old kid, is that a dilemma, a challenge, to deal with that, or is that just war?

**Answer:** After awhile it's just war. At first it's a challenge, but -- and you say, it becomes conscious -- you become conscious of why you were made a gunner. If you don't shoot him down, he's going to shoot you down. And it becomes that simple. The pilot becomes aware that he's the chauffeur. Okay. And he's got to be good.

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**Question:** That's like -- I heard one of the guys, last night on the show I was watching, and he said that their slogan, you know, he said you felt bad at first, but better thee than me.

**Answer:** Absolutely. I never said it in that way but it was the same -- same thing. Absolutely. And I have a buddy that spent years in Viet Nam with the Seals. A close buddy. As a matter of fact I think he's gotten six bronze stars, which was astronomical for a war for basically a foot soldier. And it's the same philosophy. Same philosophy. And you get to where -- I've never been a foot soldier. You know, when we finished a mission, we came back to a hot meal and a warm barracks and it was -- when you -- when you went into interrogation, there was a room here with a guy sitting in here with a couple bottles of booze and you could check your name off a list and get a pretty good size hooker of booze. Which even a 19-year-old was good. And then there was only four guys on my crew that drank. So this guy that disbursed the booze was not adverse to having me come around and get back in the line and check somebody else's name off. Well now you've got two belts in you of not necessarily the best booze in the land, on a stomach that's been empty for at least 12 hours, and you've been scared to death, so, you know, the psychological business of the whole thing is -- is -- but I think that guy with the booze (laughs) helped my morale a great deal. (laughs)

**Question:** Did you come back and think about the cities you bombed, or -- you're at what, 30-some thousand, 20-some thousand feet --

**Answer:** Twenty-some thousand. We never got about 25,000, I don't think. Our plane, you know. And I -- I was always delighted when we hit the target. Always.

**Question:** Were you fighting a country or people? I mean, in your mind, your enemy was --

**Answer:** My enemy was the dictator and his words. I -- I never -- I used to have some black and white photographs and I never will forget one of them was a flat car, rail road flat car, stacked with bodies like logs of the people they -- I don't know where they were going with the flat car, I don't know how they got them on, just had the pictures of these, among other things. And -- and you know, Hitler changed warfare. He fought the whole people. If you think about what you see of war prior to Hitler, you know, Genghis Khan and his hordes, or even Attila the Hun. They charged out of there and found another Army someplace. Out here in the prairie they had a meeting and fought their thing with the swords and the spears and the lances and all that kind of stuff. But the people in town generally were left out of it. This guy declared war on the country, man. I mean, he blew the shit out of everything he could get ahold of. It didn't make any difference to him what it was, or whether you were a woman, a man, a child, whatever. It didn't make any difference to Mussolini, it didn't make any difference to Hitler, didn't make any difference to Hirohito. You know, just think of what happened at Pearl Harbor. Okay. There's 1400 guys or 1700, whatever it is, on the Arizona, that sank with the ship. It sank that fast what this many guys never got out of that ship. And for what reason? Why would you want to do this unless you want to dominate a whole country? I don't want to be dominated, man. No. They fixed it up where this old man is permanently pissed off at dictators. Doesn't make any difference to me whether they're a bureaucrat or what they are. I don't like dictators. I wasn't born to take orders from a dictator. I have a fervent belief in God and he created me a free human being, and with a -- with theoretically a conscience, and that's how I want to live.

**Question:** And is that -- it sounds like that the good thing was is that you and the American troops, it was the common person and unified protection.

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**Answer:** Absolutely, absolutely. It was built -- you talking about the formation of the B-17s now or --

**Question:** Well, I'm just talking about the overall --

**Answer:** Or the whole Army -- the whole thing --

**Question:** Yeah.

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, there was a point when the B-17s were employed to drop supplies to the troops. You know, some of Patton's Army moved awful fast. When they got over the initial landing, they really moved like lightening. They moved ahead of their fuel supply. Their tanks ran out of fuel. The guys that drove the fuel trucks couldn't keep up to supply -- they had stretched the supply line out too far, you know, too fast, or -- not too far, too fast, because they wanted to win the friggin' war, but it was too fast -- everything couldn't keep up. This was also new for America

**Answer:** America had never been in this kind of a war before either. You know, so.

**Question:** And if you break that -- that line, if you don't have the supply line, then --

**Answer:** Oh, if you don't have a supply line then --

**Question:** That's how we took Japan, yeah.

**Answer:** Right, exactly. That's why Truman advocated using the -- the nuclear bomb, because the supply line would have been outrageous and we -- to invade Japan, to have -- to have a physical force invade Japan, would have crucified thousands and thousands of Americans. I believe we would have won, but I also think that we would have lots thousands and thousands extra -- extra men. I think it was good that Truman dropped that bomb.

**Question:** Now how big was your crew on your plane? How many --

**Answer:** Ten.

**Question:** Ten.

**Answer:** Ten men. They made it nine, after I had finished flying. Now we had a ground crew, okay, taking care of our plane. Mechanics and armorers. And they could ... I believe they could get in -- if they could get 50 missions out of that plane, I believe they could go home. I think that's right. Now, anyways. But anyway the plane -- the one with the cat and the figures 13 on it, went into the North Sea on its 54th mission, and it had nine guys on the plane. That was the day they took it from ten to nine. Cause they had two guys in the waist, one on each side, and it -- enemy planes are not going to come like this aiming at the plane because they'd shoot each other. So they took one waist gunner out and made it nine guys. So this plane went down with nine guys on it in the North Sea, and one waist gunner got out. North Sea Rescue rescued one guy. The rest of them are still in the plane, I guess. So. And another plane went down, this guy was climbing and clowning around up there, you know doing this business (gestures) instead of staying in the formation. And he came up under another B-17 and took them both down. So, none of the other guys got out. So of the 18 men, only one guy got out. So, and he was pretty well nervous. He was pretty upset when he got -- they finally got him back to shore. Which I don't blame him.

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**Question:** That has to be a pretty close group -- close team of nine, ten guys.

**Answer:** You get pretty close, pretty close. They -- when we finished flying that parrot ship and all that kind of jazz, you know, they sent the rest of the crew home and made me a gunnery instructor at another base that was just getting started, okay. And for no more reason than I was a good gunner, okay. But they sent the other guys home. When I went to this new base, I was considered some kind of a hero. Well, here's a guy that's got 30 missions in. And we're just here, you know. He shot down planes and we're just here, wow. You know, he's somebody that if you got in the chow line they'd get you right up in the head of the chow line. All kinds of fringe benefits, you know. (laughs) But I was the loneliest son of a bitch on the planet, you know. I -- I just -- there was a whole bunch of guys gone that I had lived with, drank with, ate with, and basically that's who I ate with and slept with and -- and played cards with, whatever, you know, and now they're gone. So, loneliness. And you're -- you're in, you know, there's a thousand guys, and you're still lonely. It's -- it's a different feeling.

**Question:** So you're training all these young kids to go over and --

**Answer:** To shoot.

**Question:** Are you trying to give them advice and say --

**Answer:** Absolutely.

**Question:** You know, let me tell you, I thought they weren't going to shoot at me, let me tell you the reality?

**Answer:** Absolutely, absolutely. And they listened. It was different then in the States. They listened. It was a guy that has theoretically been there and done that and he's -- he's -- you know, he's -- obviously, it was obvious to them anyway that I was telling the truth. So.

**Question:** So you had the longest mission -- so your average missions were well over six hours?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Most of them were ten, 11, 12 hours. And the record is over there, anyway. I think your partner has taken pictures of all of the records. But there's a hell of a lot of combat hours there.

**Question:** Are you -- is it the type of thing, once you get up, that you're busy, busy, busy, or is there -- because you got to get over the Channel, and the you got to get -- so is it -- is it a lot of just waiting, or are you --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, absolutely. And if there's no action, you know, if the engines are all running right, it lulls me, it lulled me, okay. There was a point in the mission, if there was no action, where it was awful hard to stay awake, okay, if that's not too hard to believe. That's a hell of a place to take a nap, but (laughs). But I never did go to sleep but I've caught my head bopping against the -- the Sperrys (laughs).

**Question:** What's it -- you talked about, what, 75 miles long?

**Answer:** Yeah.

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**Question:** What is that like to see? I mean I can't even imagine that many planes up in the air. How do you get them up? Are you coming from different strips or --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, each outfit has its own group or its own base, its own runways, its own this, and up here there's a -- oh, what the hell do they call it, where they meet, okay. And there's a point where you -- you take off a little bit before this guy over here. So that you get to this point before he does, and now you get in line that way, okay. It's like -- it's like a parade. Everybody don't get in the parade at the same minute, you -- you follow what I'm trying to say? Yeah. And then it's pretty precise. It's -- and considering that they didn't have the -- the electronic business to tell you where you are on a foggy mornings and all that kind of stuff, what do they -- what do they call it? You know it was very primitive, and they had kind of a beeper here and you flew around and around in a circle and this beeper over this noise until you got to the proper -- until you got above the clouds. Generally it was nice and sunny up there. At 10,000 feet you had to put on your oxygen, and most of the clouds over where we were, you could get above them at 10,000 feet and then it was a beautiful sunny day. It was awesome. But I was amazed that we -- and sometimes planes wouldn't pay attention to what was happening, and they'd have a wreck right there and -- and crash, you know. We've got a -- a special here that was put on years and years ago, oh I forget now, one of the well -- more well-known reporters is a narrator on it. And they got an awful lot of pictures of B-17's --

**Question:** Andy Rooney?

**Answer:** No, it wasn't Andy Rooney, no. Crashing, you know and this kind of stuff. And it's interesting. There's a couple of pictures in there where they show my group and, you know, it's -- it's interesting. If you'd like we could show you some of these after this is all done, if you've got the time.

**Question:** That would be great. So -- so it's not just like, you take off the runway and now you -- you and --

**Answer:** John Palmer is -- John Palmer is the --

**Question:** Is that the narrator, oh, okay.

**Answer:** Yeah. No, you don't all take off -- you take off in a line. There's pictures of it in this --

**Question:** And you got to jockey around for awhile before you get everybody all --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, absolutely, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Question:** So we must have lost a number of planes to friendly fire, I mean so to speak.

**Answer:** Well, it's not friendly fire.

**Question:** Well what I mean, by friendly fire, I just mean in -- in just getting up and --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah, okay. That was -- that was planes lost. And then when you -- there's a caliber 50 machine gun fits in, like a holder for the gun, okay. You slide it into this holder and fasten it in there and when you shoot it, it recoils inside this holder and all that kind of stuff. Well this one gunner, somewhere, I forget now where, was loading his guns, okay. And you charge the gun with this caliber 50 shell to where it -- it lacks one bullet of

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going into the chamber, okay. And you shoot -- there's a handle on each side of them and that's how you cock that and get that one bullet in. They're in a -- the bullets are in a belt, okay. And somehow or another when he was on the ground, and when he's on the ground, the guns are pointed out toward the front of the plane and he's loading the guns and getting, make sure everything's okay. He got a bullet in the chamber, on either one or both guns, I've forgotten which, and it fired. Well, the gun -- the turret is in free-wheeling, so, oh it was in one gun because it started spinning the turret. Okay. And I don't know how many planes it shot up on the hard stand which was the, you know, before they got it stopped. Just -- it was unbelievable, you know. Just, that was -- that was -- so that made me even more careful putting my guns in, or everybody else, putting them in. But especially the belly turret because that spun around. The tail turret didn't. The top turret spun around but it was above, you know, it was up -- it was up in the air. All the others were just on a stand and they just shot out the window or something, you know so -- but --

**Question:** Wow.

**Answer:** Belly turret was fascinating, really. I got -- when I got discharged they give you a pretty good physical on the way out, at Fort Dix, New Jersey. And the two doctors there, they, you know, you're pretty well stripped down. And they put their hands on my back, right there in the small of my back and asked me does it hurt? Well I was an hour from getting an honorable discharge, you know, and I said no it don't hurt. If I had had any brains, I'd had said yeah, it hurts, 'cause I've been going to the chiropractor ever since. (laughs) And they maybe could have fixed it at 19 years old, you know, or 20 years old. But now it's beyond fixing. The best friends I have in Newport are the two chiropractors in this town. (laughs) So, anyway.

**Question:** Is it loud? I mean when you're -- I mean cause you're -- let's see your hand fire here, but the guns are -- are here, next to you.

**Question:** Right here, right alongside your legs, just like that, just like that. (gestures) And you're sitting basically in this position. Okay. Your legs are cocked a little bit more up, like so. For me it was more. (laughs)

**Question:** And how loud would you describe it? I mean, much louder than a shotgun, I would assume?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, but I don't think the loud ever registered. I really don't think it -- I don't think I ever paid too much attention to the noise. We shot them on the ground and everywhere practicing, you know, and in the back of that little two-seated fighter plane and all this kind of stuff. I don't think I ever paid any attention to the noise. The fact that they shot was the part that was interesting to me. I mean, they -- they had to shoot, you know. Well, why fine -- they were fine-tuned, man. My gun shined like a brand new nickle. I had a little cabinet made out of an old bomb box that I put them in when we finished flying, you know, all oiled up and stuff. You ain't never seen two guns that had better care than them two.

**Question:** So you took them out between missions --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Out of the -- out of the carrying business, you know. That's not what it's called. I forget what it's called.

**Question:** I've got to switch tapes here.