

## Don Wilson

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**Question:** I'd like to have you start with your name --

**Answer:** Thomas Wilson, known as Don Wilson.

**Question:** Okay.

**Answer:** I live on Steamboat Island, I've been there some 26 years now.

**Question:** Okay. And Karl also likes to know what you did -- what branch of the military you served in?

**Answer:** I served with the Army Air Corps, now US Air Force. Went into the Air Force, Army Air Corps, in 1940, June the 6th, to become an aircraft mechanic. Immediately I went to mechanics school and became a mechanic, and a crew chief and a line chief and the war started. I applied for and was accepted to become a flying cadet and had my flying training all in Arizona

**Answer:** And from flight training, 1943, I transitioned into B-26 Marauder combat aircraft at Del Rio, Texas. And from the transition period at Del Rio I went to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana, where I became a flight instructor. Stayed there for a couple of years.

Left there in January of '45 to the European theatre and joined the 17th Bomb Group in Dijon, France, January.

**Question:** Were you commissioned during this time or --

**Answer:** Yes, commissioned upon graduation from flight school in '43.

**Question:** When you first flew B-26's -- I read in the -- I just read in the loss page that B-26's -- they were hard to learn to fly. Is that true?

**Answer:** They had a very bad reputation, because they had some difficult flight characteristics on one engine. And usually, an engine was lost on takeoff or shortly after, if the engine was going to quit. And it had to be a pretty quick transition to trim the airplane up and feather that dead prop, get the airplane trim and remain in flight. Because at takeoff also, usually had the heaviest load on with armament, and fuel. So things were really bad there for a few seconds to get the airplane under control. Unfortunately a lot of people didn't get it under control so we had a lot of crashes on takeoff. In fact I think statistics show that the B-26 -- there were more deaths in the B-26 in this country than in war. Just training in the things.

**Question:** Did you ever lose an engine on your --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah, but fortunately handled it all right. But as I say, it had that bad reputation and just before graduating from flying school, we were all -- all of our graduates, all of us were looking for what kind of airplane we wanted to fly. And they gave us a choice. If the choice didn't fit the government, of course, they put us where they wanted to. And -- but at Yuma, a few days before graduation, a factory pilot came down to Yuma in a B-26 aircraft and demonstrated it to us, I guess to try to persuade us to want to fly his airplanes. But he did all sorts of fancy maneuvers with it, single engine, he rolled it, things that you -- we don't do to those airplanes, but he did. Nevertheless we went to Del Rio to train in the airplane. And it had this bad reputation, there was a combat training place in Shreveport, where I went. There was one also in Tampa, Florida

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**Answer:** And at Tampa, there was a saying, one a day in Tampa Bay. From the B-26. And some people called it the flying prostitute because it had no visible means of support. Very short, high load. In fact at that time it was the highest wing loaded that an airplane in the inventory.

**Question:** Did you ever see one going down?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Saw them crash and burn all over the place.

**Question:** They were too low to get out of the plane, I take it?

**Answer:** Yeah, or trying to -- trying to make a survival landing on a -- in a field or something, with gear up. And then of course in combat I saw a few lost there. Burned or exploded in the air with their bombs aboard. But.

**Question:** When your airplane lost an engine, was it automatic, what you did to get out of the --

**Answer:** Not -- well, it was -- supposedly automatic, what you did to shut that engine down and what they call clean up the airplane -- get everything as streamlined as you can.

**Question:** Do you remember being -- what you felt like when that happened?

**Answer:** Well, the feather switches for the left and right engine were right up here on the pedestal, right together. I don't know why they didn't put one over here and one over here. But usually it was co-pilot's job when the pilot would call for feather, the co-pilot would do the feathering. And it was claimed, I don't know, lot of times the co-pilot got the wrong switch. And so if you -- of course the feathering was really quick. Feather the good engine, the other one bad, you're in bad, bad trouble. So that was a bad thing about the airplane. But the airplane had fewer combat losses than any other combat aircraft in the inventory, in combat, had the fewest losses. So that said something good for it.

**Question:** Why was that?

**Answer:** Well, it was ruggedly built, built strong, had good engines, very good, reliable engines, and the crews that got that far with it, knew how to run it. Once you got there. But the reputation was so bad, when I went to Del Rio, they assigned, I believe, five new trainees to one instructor pilot. So our instructor took five of us out on the ramp to look at the airplane. And as we walked out there and he was pointing out this, that feature. And I looked around these other four guys and three of them were visibly shaking. Just standing there looking at that airplane. And I - I couldn't believe that. But they were really frightened, just standing there looking at the damn thing. But, but anyway it turned out for most of us who survived it, we liked the airplane a whole lot, loved it.

**Question:** How old were you at that point?

**Answer:** I think it was 21, 20 or 21 years old.

**Question:** Then -- but you joined before the war started.

**Answer:** Oh, well, yes. I had, yeah. Went in the Air Force when I was just 18.

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**Question:** Did you know that there was going to be a war or --

**Answer:** Oh, Lord, no, no, no, no, had no idea

**Answer:** But no one else did. But we -- we were -- as I say, I was a mechanic. I was happy with that, maintaining airplanes, and I enjoyed that. I was at Moffett Field on December 7, 1941. Moffett is just south of San Francisco, on the peninsula, near Sunnyvale, San Jose. And we had been sent there -- we'd been there maybe a month or two. And we were bringing in recruits into the service and we were training recruits -- trying to. Jimmy Stewart was one of them that came in there. But we -- we didn't train him much. But we shared the stuff with him. But the day the war started, three of us were on that Sunday morning, in fact we were having lunch in -- I forget the name of the town just off the base. And then we heard it on the radio for all military return to their bases. So we finished lunch and went back to the base. In those days you didn't have any ID of any kind proving that you were military. And had those big iron gates at the guard house entering the base. I suppose they hadn't been closed in 40 years but they were closed now. And the guard, of course, wouldn't let us in until he called back and had our first sergeant come over and identify us and let us back on the base. And for the rest of the afternoon we were sent -- dropped off at the perimeter of the base with shovels to dig fox holes, cause we thought we were going to be invaded. So we dug fox holes but we didn't have any weapons. Sergeant said there's a truck coming from Monterey with the weapons. So before nightfall, there did come a big truck, drove up each fox hole and dumped out an old water-cooled 30 caliber machine gun that we'd never seen before -- didn't know how to run it. But it looked awesome. But we didn't have any ammunition. Well don't worry, it's coming. And sure enough, in a couple hours, another truck came by, threw out a box of ammunition. Fifty-caliber, for the 30 caliber gun. So, but anyway we didn't have to shoot at anybody, fortunately.

**Question:** What did you talk about when you were sitting in this foxhole?

**Answer:** Well, just wondering just how bad this war was going to be, you know, and how a little country like Japan, a bunch of people who didn't know how to do anything, really -- couldn't see well, didn't have good eyes, they weren't very big, and they were all bow-legged, how they could -- thought that they could stage a war against great America

**Answer:**

**Question:** So did you know -- you knew how extensive the damage had been in Pearl Harbor at that point?

**Answer:** No, we were just getting it on the radio like everybody else was getting it. And in our unit was a staff sergeant who had just come from Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu and his wife and young baby daughter were still there. And he, needless to say, was frightened to death. He was really worried about his family. And I think he heard nothing about them for about a week or ten days, but they were safe. So that was quite a burden for him to bear, worry about his wife and daughter. They put her on.. and the baby on a ship and sent them home right away.

**Question:** You weren't married at this time, were you?

**Answer:** Oh, no, oh, no, nobody was married then.

**Question:** And your parents are back in Georgia?

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**Answer:** No, at that time they were living in Texas, yeah, they were living in Texas at that time. I left Georgia when I was a two-year-old.

**Question:** So was your mom worried about you?

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah, well, I had a brother -- two brothers in the Marines at the time, too, and my mother, of course, was concerned more about them than me, I guess.

**Question:** She thought that Moffett Field was pretty safe then.

**Answer:** Yeah, of course she didn't know where Moffett Field was, I guess, or maybe even where California was.

**Question:** How did she get ahold of you to find out if you were okay, do you remember?

**Answer:** Oh, no, I don't think she inquired. I think I probably, you know, just wrote her. I wrote home every week for all the time that I was in the service.

**Question:** Were your brothers -- they were in the continental United States at that time?

**Answer:** I think one was at Bremerton and the other one, I'm not sure where he was, but he was very shortly in Guadalcanal. And maybe he was on his way there -- I don't remember how -- just where he was at Pearl Harbor day. But that was one of the amazing things -- have to give this country credit for. Roosevelt stood there and said we're going to build a thousand airplanes a day, and I knew what an airplane was, and all the -- all it took to build one of those things. I couldn't believe it -- that's a dream -- you can't build a thousand airplanes in a day. Well, I think in a year they were doing it. And just marvelous -- hard to believe. About a week after Pearl Harbor day, then, they sent three of us -- we got orders to go to Bakersfield, California

**Answer:** We were mechanics and we had a car, we drove to Bakersfield and got there around 10 o'clock at night, inquired about where's the airport and some all night service station sent us out on the road. Went out there and there was a little building, smaller than this room, with a light on, there was one man in there. And he was an FAA radio operator. And we said -- showed him our orders -- said where do we report? He says no place to report -- this is the only building around here. Well, is there another airfield? No, this is the only airfield -- it's an emergency airfield, and he's the only guy around. Well, good old Army screwed up again. So we went back and got a motel, the next morning got up late, had a late breakfast, well, we'll go out there and try to sort this out. We got there around 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, and at that time there were probably already 200 tents erected with hard backs -- plywood floor and the wall four feet high, and they had a gang of carpenters there putting that stuff together, two rows at a time of these tents, with a crane between each two. As they would get the hardback done, the crane would pick this tent up and set it on top like that. Those two cranes. And by nightfall there must have been 600 tents on that place. All that from -- from morning, from dark to dark. All that. And I just couldn't believe something like that happening. But again, had to be done, and as everything else, I guess.

**Question:** When did -- when did everybody show up to --

**Answer:** Well, then, then people started coming in. We were the first ones there, and then other people started coming and coming. We didn't stay there very long, that turned out

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to be a -- I guess a fueling stop or something for B-24s being flown to -- through Alaska to Russia

**Answer:** And so B-24's were being ferried through there, on the ferry command. We only stayed there about a month or two and then went to Victorville, California

**Answer:** And doing some more airplane mechanic work, and then I went to fly airplanes myself.

**Question:** And that's where you started your training and --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah. Trained at Thunderbird Field at Phoenix and then had basic training in Arizona and final training in Yum

**Answer:**

**Question:** What was your first choice of aircraft? You said the B-26 wasn't your first choice.

**Answer:** No, I wanted to fly a P-38, but the government had a funny way of doing that, since of deduce. They told me I was too big. To fly a fighter you had to -- you could only be 5'10" and weigh 160 pounds. But I think they changed that requirement because they needed more fighter pilots, they raised it to 5'11" and 170 or lower it -- as -- to keep the pipeline steady. That's the way they did it. So I hit the pipeline at the wrong time, or right whichever, and I went to B-26s instead of P-38.

**Question:** Was that one of your choices or is that just what they ended up --

**Answer:** No, that was a choice. That was a choice, after the P-38.

**Question:** So when you were -- when you finally became operational -- an operational B-26 pilot, where did you go after that?

**Answer:** Well, I'd say -- I stayed at Barksdale, which was a -- let's see, what did they call it? Combat training unit, I believe they called that, and I stayed there as an instructor for, I think about a year and a half. Then January '45, went over to France.

**Question:** So then while you were an instructor, did you lose any of your students or anything in the --

**Answer:** Oh, no, no, maybe in the bar, but not in the airplane. (laughs)

**Question:** And that was -- and you instructed on B-26s or --

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** So were they all scared when they first got there --

**Answer:** Oh, no, no. By that time -- by the time they got there, they'd -- they'd already been through the -- the transition training at another base somewhere.

**Question:** So they'd already survived --

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**Answer:** Yeah, they'd already survived maybe 60, 100 hours in the airplane, so they were comfortable with it, yeah.

**Question:** And that aircraft had what type engines?

**Answer:** Pratt-Whitney R-2800

**Question:** So radial engines --

**Answer:** Yeah, radial, 18 cylinder, radials, good engines.

**Question:** How big a bomb load could it carry?

**Answer:** I think it carried two tons.

**Question:** And it had a turret in the top?

**Answer:** Had a top turret, tail gunner, and then two waist guns and the bombardier had a single flexible gun in the nose, then the pallet had four what they call package guns down here on the fuselage, two on each side that were under the pilot's control. But they had to be aimed at the -- the whole airplane had to be aimed at the target. They were fixed guns.

**Question:** So how large a crew did you have on it?

**Answer:** Six, six people. Bomb, navigator, co-pilot, radio operator, tail gunner and engineer, top target gunner.

**Question:** So after instructing for awhile, did you really want to get into combat or --

**Answer:** I wanted to go. I wanted to go all the time and I couldn't go. They kept -- kept me there, and I saw all my buddies come through and they kept going and they finally turned me lose when they started getting enough ex -- people out of combat, rotating them home, and made instructors out of them so finally they got a veteran and so I could go take his place over there. So that's the way that worked.

**Question:** So when you finally were sent over to Europe, you had your crew, your full crew with you then?

**Answer:** Yeah, we took the crew over, and we had the privilege of riding a ship overseas. Probably the worst or second worst voyage I ever had in my life. English ship, New Mauritania and that captain -- I hope he's roasting in hell. And I suppose they're all that way, especially the British captains. But the food on that thing was terrible -- it was awful. Wintertime on the Atlantic. No escort. They said this ship could outrun any submarine. Didn't -- weren't concerned with that -- I was more concerned with the food. A white plate, for breakfast now, a white cold plate, and they put on that a square piece of white fish with a white sauce on top of that. And the whole damn thing is cold, for breakfast, out in the cold Atlantic. And then about 15 minutes later they make an announcement, all -- all hands on deck, clean sweep, fore and aft. So everybody had to get out and up on the decks and try to find a place out of the cold and sleet and wind to hide. First cold I ever had in my life I got on that damn ship. And went directly off that ship into the dispensary in England.

**Question:** So the captain treated you like part of the crew of the ship then?

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**Answer:** Treated everybody that way. Now the officers -- we had -- I think I shared a cabin with three other officers, but all our enlisted men were down in the hold. So I went down to visit them, and they were just in there like cattle. And.. people vomiting, steel decks and vomiting all -- hell it was dangerous to walk in there. Oh. And the latrine in that thing was up in the bow, with a trough over here and a trough over there and water running through. And all the slime on the floor and people trying to stand there and urinate into this damn trough, half of it going in the trough and half on the deck. It was miserable, anyway. And it stunk down there, God it did stink. No ventilation. So I get my -- I told my crew, I said you guys come up here to my cabin in the daytime, you come up here and stay, I want you to stay in this cabin. Get out of that damn hold down there. Terrible.

**Question:** It was a cargo ship that was converted?

**Answer:** No, it was a passenger liner -- passenger liner converted to troops. New Mauritania, Hope that things at the bottom of an ocean somewhere now.

**Question:** Now was there -- was it a British merchant crew on it or --

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, British were crewing it. Yeah.

**Question:** Did you ever talk to the captain?

**Answer:** No, no, no, oh, God, no. Lieutenant doesn't talk to a captain.

**Question:** He never got down out of the bridge to see how --

**Answer:** I think he never left his stateroom, no. Anyway, I was happy to get off that thing and went into the dispensary. And the dispensary was just as cold as the ship. I didn't like being in England much.

**Question:** So then was that where you operated out of was England or --

**Answer:** No, stayed there -- got out of the dispensary in four or five days and they shipped me over to France. But --

**Question:** So you never got to see any of England besides the dispensary then?

**Answer:** Oh, I did get an opportunity to go out to -- Stoke-on-Trent, I believe was the name of the place. Stoke-on-Trent. And nearby there is the Wedgwood china factory -- where they make Wedgwood. I went out and visited there, enjoyed that. And one night in town I -- they had a vendor selling fish and chips. And uh, kinda liked that. That was hot -- hot food. So I took an order of fish and chips, chips in one, fish here, in my topcoat pocket so I get back into that cold room, I could eat that stuff before I went to bed. I got back in that cold room, turned the light on -- I couldn't wait to get -- took -- open it up and all that stuff was just solid lard. It was congealed lard. Terribly appetizing.

**Question:** So while you're there in the dispensary, your crew was there with you also?

**Answer:** Yeah, they -- they stayed around waiting for me to get out. In fact I think one of them was sick, too.

So from there we went over to France to Dijon, France, the home of the mustard family. And there we lived in tents, which was kind of an interesting thing. When our adjutant -- our unit had moved up there from Sardinia

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**Answer:** . Corsica, I forgot which -- and our adjutant Jack came up there ahead of the unit to make sure the airfield was ready and -- cause they were all shot up. But anyway he went up there to take care of billeting matters and those kind of things. And he had a French lieutenant with him, English speaking. And they were driving along to -- towards a chateau, and Jack looked over the side here and he saw a whole bunch of tin shacks and looked like a - - a no man's land or something down in there. And he asked the lieutenant, what is that all over there? And the Frenchman said oh, that's a mustard. And he said well let's stop. When we get the troops here, we're going to need mustard. So they did, and so Jack said well on the 15th or whatever, bring us some mustard out, we'll be at the chateau down here, so you bring mustard. And the farmer said all right. And sure enough, that day, he showed up in a horse and a two-wheel cart and he had two 50-gallon drums like that in that damn cart of mustard. And Jack told him he thought that was quite enough. But Jack takes credit for starting that Poupon Grey Mustard Company up again. (laughs) But we -- in the chateau -- some count's chateau, we put our headquarters in there and the -- the majors slept in there.

**Question:** You weren't sleeping in the chateau --

**Answer:** No, no, we were sleeping out in the grounds where we had our tents set up and we had little pot-belly stoves in there. I don't know if you've ever seen one of these but they're -- they're really unique little stove, good little stove. So we all get a gasoline can, drum or something, set it outside on the rack, steal a piece of cooper quarter-inch tubing from the flight mechanics, and put a valve on it and run it into the stove. Put some bricks in the stove, and then burn that 120-octane fuel in our little stove, you know, and oh, man, that thing would turn red hot. It was a really good stove.

**Question:** So you're finally got warm then?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. And the -- the sidewalks down the tent row -- they put 2x4s up there to contain the aggregate -- the aggregate they didn't have, so they used 9 millimeter captured German ammunition. Just filled the trough with that and that's what we walked on. That was our gravel.

**Question:** Live rounds?

**Answer:** Live ammunition. Yeah, 9 millimeter stuff. Had to be used for something. Anyway, once in awhile, somebody would get too much cognac. The other guys in the tent asleep, on the way in the tent he'd pick up a handful of that gravel, drop it in that little pot-belly stove, and the little stove would just sit there and vibrate, pop, bang, bang, just wake up the tent mates.

**Question:** You got there before the aircraft got there or --

**Answer:** No, we didn't take our aircraft. It was -- the unit was full of aircraft --

**Question:** So they came --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah, they came on up. And they were getting replacement aircraft -- airplanes as they needed them.

**Question:** So did you get a new aircraft when it showed up or did you get a -



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**Answer:** No, no, in fact I never flew the same airplane -- just by chance. This one, this one, whichever one they assigned to. Nobody had their own airplane. Just flew whichever was -- they wanted to assign you to.

**Question:** So how old was the airplane that you flew in first, do you remember?

**Answer:** Oh, I suppose newest I flew was maybe -- maybe had a hundred hours on, yeah. The oldest probably had 1500 hours and I remember one -- I got stuck with that one two or three times. It was a -- just a war-weary airplane. The only way to get it airborne was to pull the gear up on it. Get to the end of the runway fast as you can get there, then just pull the gear up and then it would fly. But I think that thing could have run forever if you left the gear down -- it never would have gotten off the ground. It was just a tired airplane, sick airplane.

**Question:** Pretty shot up was it --

**Answer:** No, I don't know what all was wrong with it, but I guess it -- hard landings and so forth, it would get out of alignment or something, maybe. I don't know what. And weak engines after, you know -- after a certain wear -- engines wouldn't put out a hundred percent power.

**Question:** So after you got stationed over in Dijon, when was your first combat, do you remember that?

**Answer:** I don't remember what day it was -- I wasn't there long til' they put -- they took all the pilots and made them ride co-pilot with another guy for -- for one or two missions, and I guess just to look at the scenery or whatever.

**Question:** How many days after D-Day were you there? Was it quite awhile or --

**Answer:** Well, D-Day, no, D-Day had already occurred. That went on in '44.

**Question:** So it was quite awhile after --

**Answer:** After D-Day, yeah. Yeah, France was already liberated when I got there.

**Question:** And how close was Dijon to the enemy units, do you know?

**Answer:** Was the enemy, you say?

**Question:** Yeah, how many nautical miles?

**Answer:** Oh, we were probably 50 miles from the front lines, I would guess. Yeah, probably 50 miles.

**Question:** So did the Luftwaffe ever launch any raids against your air base?

**Answer:** No, no, nothing against the air field. No, they were, I think at that time, expending everything they could toward bombers, trying to beat the bombers back.

**Question:** So when you took off, how many knots did your B-26 travel at cruising?

**Answer:** About 160.

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**Question:** So it didn't take you very long to cover 50 miles?

**Answer:** No, no, our missions were usually three hours, I'd say. Once, I think two or three times, we got up to four hours. But usually about three, three and a half hours.

**Question:** Do you remember the first mission when you went in combat? Do you remember the whole mission or is it not --

**Answer:** No, no, not -- I don't recall anything significant happening, and just busy trying to keep the airplane in formation is all, and at that time we had a little bit of flak but not very much. As I say the worst thing were those fighters -- when they found us.

**Question:** Were they -- did you -- your ceiling, were you above the fighters or would they be above you when they saw you or --

**Answer:** Well, on this particular mission, on the 23rd of April, we were always briefed on what to be expected in the way of flak. Intelligence gave us that briefing, how many guns at this location, how many here. And whether we expected fighters or not, I don't know. They didn't know that anyway, but they would tell us what our fighter cover was -- protection. In this case they told us I think we had 50 close -- close support, fighters right with us, near us, and something like 150 area support. Well I never did figure out what in the hell area was -- I guess somewhere over Germany. I don't know what it meant. But they were P-47s, supporting us down there. And --

**Question:** So the first thing you encountered would have been flak on that mission?

**Answer:** Yeah, flak and --

**Question:** Was that the first time you'd ever flown through flak --

**Answer:** Well, yeah, I'd never flown through flak before. And it was -- it was not -- I didn't think much of it because I never got anything really really close. We had a procedure -- we had three airplanes full of what they call window, which was a tinfoil strip about a foot long, inch or two wide, and these window ships would go down ahead of us, two, three minutes, and the crew would kick this stuff out -- bundles of this -- and it would break up and filter down. And that -- the German radar then, would fix on that window instead of us. So the first -- we flew over in four -- what we call them flights, I guess, boxes. So the first flight over, after the window ship, he was in good shape cause the flak was breaking way down there. And the second one, he's pretty good. Well the third one, maybe one or two was getting through, and the fourth one, they were all getting through, by the time the fourth flight got over. So you didn't like to be in the fourth flight, and sure as hell didn't want to be on that window crew. Cause that window crew didn't have any protection. So we didn't -- we didn't get a great deal of flak and I think -- thankful for that crew -- that window crew.

**Question:** Was that a bombing run that you're on or --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah. And that little dog that I had the picture of there, I took her with me one day, when we got a lot of flak. And she lot of times just sit up in my lap and look out, see what's going on. And we got on the bomb run, got the doors open, and that bomb run lasts for about three minutes, or four. Nice and steady. And I was busy trying to stay in formation, that little dog would jump up and it would leave, and I didn't pay much attention, but during that three or four minutes she jumped in and out of my lap three or four times.

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After we got on the ground, the tail gunner told me that that dog came back to his place three times during that bomb run with the doors open. We had a cat walk that wide through the bomb bay door, she came back there three times and looked out. And she'd see and she'd leave again. And strangely, though, that dog -- when I got her on the ground, she was just trembling. She was really scared, really scared, and I -- I can't imagine how an animal could sense that. You know a human could sense that that was unfriendly stuff out there, but how that dog could sense it -- maybe smell it or something? I don't know. But I didn't take her anymore with me after that. I made her stay home.

**Question:** So when you're out on a three minute bomb run, the bombardier didn't take over control of the aircraft --

**Answer:** Well, no, we had a -- the lead bombardier in the whole flight -- he would take over his air -- then everybody else was flying on him and we had -- what called a toggle. Soon as I see his bombs, he just toggled on the other -- call them a toggle.

**Question:** Everybody in your box?

**Answer:** Yeah, everybody just drop at one time. With one bombardier aiming.

**Question:** So when you got into a bomb run and you were committed to do it, you were -- it was a -- you never veered --

**Answer:** No, no --

**Answer:** from your bomb run. You just toughed it out --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Question:** Was that a long three or four minutes to fly?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah. It was long and you're hoping hurry up and get out of there. But I don't know, I just never got too concerned about the flak cause I never -- I never got close to it.

**Question:** Did you ever see anybody off in your box -- did you ever watch them go down in --

**Answer:** Yeah, not from flak but from fighters --

**Question:** Fighters?

**Answer:** Yeah, not flak though.

**Question:** So then were you going in the bomb run and the flak was coming up and you're scanning the sky for fighters, I take it --

**Answer:** No, no. I was scanning nothing but the airplane -- I'm flying off his wing.

**Question:** So your crew's watching --

**Answer:** Yeah, the crew's out looking, watching for that. I'm just -- the pilot's just busy, busy, watching that other airplane so he doesn't bump wings or something.

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**Question:** So then you probably don't even see where your bombs hit target then?

**Answer:** Oh, no, no.

**Question:** High altitude drops or --

**Answer:** Well, we dropped about, usually about 10,000 feet, which is well within range of all the anti-aircraft fire.

**Question:** Is that lower than B-17?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Seventeens -- they dropped around 20,000 -- twice that high. but we -- we went in lower. And our targets were usually transportation hubs, railroad yards, ammunition depots, fuel dumps, bridges, those kind of things. We didn't bomb factories like the 8th Air Force did.

**Question:** So when you're on a bomb run and I take it everybody's on the intercom --

**Answer:** Hm-hmm.

**Question:** Do you -- was there a lot of talk?

**Answer:** Ordinarily not, no, no, we didn't talk a lot on --

**Question:** Just business.

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah. In fact the bombardier that I carried overseas with me, I think -- I think I flew maybe two or three missions with him. But he was a very excitable guy, very excitable. And he just get on an intercom and just jabber, jabber, jabber, jabber, you know. Flak, it's flak and, yeah, sure enough, three or four miles over there, you can see this flak and he's yelling about it. So after three or four missions, I talked to him and I said you stay off that intercom. We need that for other stuff. But he'd -- he'd get real excited. So I told the ops officer I want a new bombardier. I fired him and I got another one.

**Question:** So did he go to another crew after that?

**Answer:** Yeah, and story with that, he's also the navigator, bombardier and navigator. So they gave him to another guy who they had just promoted from a co-pilot to a pilot. And we were flying, of all places, flying from eastern France to western France, to the City of Bordeaux, and there was an enclave of Germans in this Bordeaux port and the Army was down there and they couldn't roust these Germans out. So they called for air support. So we get ginned up to go over there and bomb those Germans out of the town of Bordeaux. And all this over friendly territory, all the way over there. And I think our target area was not much bigger than Olympia

**Answer:** And anyway, Harry, this bombardier they put with another crew, on the way over there they lost an engine. So this a green pilot asked Harry to give him a heading to an airfield. Well, from 10,000 feet, at that time in France, you could look out any direction probably and see an airfield. So Harry gave him a heading to fly, so many minutes, so he flew that out -- there wasn't no airfield there. All that time they still got those bombs and they're going down. They're losing altitude. That airplane cannot maintain altitude with a full load on one engine. It was going down. So Harry gave him another heading. So he goes off in this

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direction. He couldn't find an airfield, and I say, they're all over the place. Well they ended up landing that airplane, wheels up, in a field. And the nose went into a hedgerow, and Harry, for God's sake, is still up in that glass nose. He didn't get out of it for the crash landing. He's still in there. Well, Harry had kind of a long nose anyway, and the best part was, that Plexiglas broke and cut a piece of it off. (laughs) So he got a new nose out of the thing. But he couldn't find an airfield for that pilot. Well, didn't -- all the crew came out of it all right. Then they -- some Frenchmen gathered around from the villages, and they got up to the drain cocks on the airplane and drained the gas out and sold it to these Frenchmen. For whatever purpose they wanted. Well, the Frenchmen took them into town, and kept them there a day or two, best hotel in town, best food, booze, cognac and everything. Then they got ready to leave and the mayor came to them and handed them a bill. The bill was, well, for the hotel and the food and everything. Gave them a bill for it. So I think Harry and the pilot negotiated some way with that gasoline and got out of paying the bill to those Frenchmen.

**Question:** So you dropped your bomb though before they --

**Answer:** No, no, they never salvo'd the bomb. They carried them to the ground with them.

**Question:** Supposed to drop them when you got problems, aren't you?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, first thing, first thing, and Harry stayed up in that glass nose, all by himself, couldn't find an airfield. Anyway, I don't -- I don't think Harry flew anymore after that. I believe they left him on the ground till his nose got healed anyway.

**Question:** And when you were -- what was the first time that you really felt any fear when you were --

**Answer:** I can't say I felt any fear. Didn't have --

**Question:** Too busy doing what you were doing and --

**Answer:** Yeah, I didn't have sense enough, I guess or too busy, you know, working the problems. I think, and that's sort of a Godsend in a way that you do get busy and.. feel sorry, maybe for the other guys, like the co-pilot, you know. He sits there and he has nothing to do. Except --

**Question:** How about your gunners?

**Answer:** Well, I guess -- I don't know if they were bothered by it much or not. But they had a job to do -- at least look around and --

**Question:** So that would have been your first indication that a fighter was approaching probably a gunner would spot them and --

**Answer:** Well, no, on that one case where Galland got shot down, we had been briefed on this mission. In fact, to begin with, we had been near this base where those German fighters were -- been past there the day before bombing

**Question:** You're talking about the ME262, the Jet --

**Answer:** Yeah.

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**Question:** Yeah.

**Answer:** We'd been bombing an ammunition depot down in Munich -- Near Munich, and on the way home they had those K-2 cameras back in the waist gun. These guys in the waist, photographers, they'd just take pictures of everything, out the window, you know, the ground, everything, just use up that film. Well then the -- develop that film that night and -- and pictures of this airfield -- we flew right over, with these fighters on it, the jets. So during the night the intelligence people said, well, we'll go bomb those tomorrow. So they filled the first 30 of our airplanes they loaded up with fragmentation bombs and the next 30 they loaded up with incendiaries -- we were going to blow the airplanes -- shatter them up and then burn them. So we headed for that location -- for that airfield. And we came upon some clouds, kept climbing and climbing to get over those clouds. I think it was a maybe a 7/10th coverage or something, pretty high cumulous. And suddenly the formation makes a hard turn to the left and I glance out, lower clouds, and I figure the formation leader's just trying to avoid those clouds. And during this turn I felt a little bump. And I said well, that's a prop wash from somebody, and I've got a wing in somebody's prop wash. Then I felt another bump, then I heard somebody yell, "Flak". Then I saw a burst of flak out here. And we weren't yet to what we call the bomb line, where we -- on the start on the bomb run we put on our helmets. Well now, I didn't have my helmet on yet, it was sitting down here on the floor. So when whoever it was yelled flak, my co-pilot grabbed that helmet and slammed it on my head right down to here (gestures) and we're in this big turn. (laughs) And -- and, but I got rid of that, but in the meantime, my windshield defrosters weren't working. Everything was frosted up, and I had a little hole about this big that I was keeping clean with my hand, that's all I could see. Just enough to see that airplane to fly on his wing. And of course they yell, flak, there's the helmet.. then somebody yelled, "Fighters". And that's what it was, those seven ME262's.

**Question:** So it wasn't flak then --

**Answer:** Well, no, they were flying --

**Question:** Oh, from their planes --

**Answer:** -- they were firing 20 millimeter canon -- yeah, yeah, it was flak, but from their cannon instead. But I guess from people who were observing the thing said those airplanes came off -- they came from that airfield we were going to. But they came off, and Galland said this in his book. They took off and they were always after us for some reason. (laughs) But they came up, past us, turned around and came in on our tail, right, level flight with us. And I didn't get to see much of the whole thing. Our fighters, P-47 pilots said that they could keep up with one of those jets as long as they were going down. They could stay with him. But those -- those jets would fly through and fire and P-47s chasing them, they'd go way out here somewhere, the 47s, and then they -- then they'd turn around and beat the 47s back to the formation again. But through my little hole I saw one jet go through the formation like that (gestures) and on each wing was a P-47. And that's what the fighters called had him boxed. Any way he turns, he's going to be getting in front of one of their guns, either this one or that one. If they can stay up with him. But they claim they could, and I don't know if they got him or not, but that's all I saw of the whole thing was three going that way.

**Question:** That was your first encounter with a 262?

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah, and that was the end of 262's. They were finished then.

**Question:** Really?

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**Answer:** Oh, yeah, that's when Galland got shot down that day and all his -- his six buddies.

**Question:** So one of your group shot him down then?

**Answer:** Well, no, one of our fighter escorts --

**Question:** Fighter cover.

**Answer:** Yeah, fighter pilot from San Francisco, yeah.

**Question:** So had you been briefed on the 262's before?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. And we could see the contrails way out there somewhere, we could see them. Our planes weren't making them. Just one contrail, too, and we never had one airplane operating like that. Then we saw the contrail but never saw the airplane of that 263, I believe it was, that little rocket ship they had.

**Question:** Oh, the Comet.

**Answer:** Comet, yeah. That was -- that was a one-pass airplane only, and they were after the B-17s. They didn't bother us.

**Question:** So was that your -- that wasn't your first encounter with German aircraft, though, you --

**Answer:** That was, the only. First and only, yeah.

**Question:** First and last was the 262.

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Question:** Never any prop-driven --

**Answer:** No, never saw a prop-driven airplane.

**Question:** Boy, that's quite an encounter then.

**Answer:** Well, that was -- that was enough. (laughs) But as I say we, when we got back on the ground and debriefed, they shot down three of our B-26's and our gunners claimed three of them and our fighters claim four, and that was at debrief. Well, in Gallon's book he had different numbers altogether. And that's why I wrote him and criticized his book. And he answered me back that I was wrong, Lieutenant. (laughs)

**Question:** Was that pretty much -- that was pretty much the end of the 262's?

**Answer:** Yeah, it was. That was the last flight ever with 262. In fact, after the war ended, I think the month of June, I believe it was June, we moved -- my outfit moved to that base. Which is called Schleisheim on the north outskirts of Munich. We moved there and here were all these wrecked airplanes all around the place.

**Question:** So you got -- actually got to see one up close and --

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**Answer:** Oh yeah, yeah. Fact I shot -- tried to shoot through the windshield of one of them with my 45 but it -- it just bounced off. That windshield was about two, three inches thick.

**Question:** That Plexiglas, was it or --

**Answer:** I don't know what kind of glass, but of course it was an angle like that. I'm standing on the ground, you know, 30 feet away, but there was a lot of wrecked ones around on the airfield there, beat up.

**Question:** And they're still -- so when you moved up there, then you -- the war was still on, still, right?

**Answer:** We moved into Schleisheim, no-no, no-no, the war's ended then. It was June whatever. June or July we moved down there.

**Question:** Do you still keep in touch with your crew?

**Answer:** Only my engineer, lives down in Florida, where he always lived. And that -- that bombardier, Harry, he's from San Francisco, Menlo Park, and I've seen him a couple of times. That's the only one. I think the radio operator has long since died, never could find the co-pilot, don't know what happened to him. So, and the tail gunner was -- I think he went crazy or something. He lived in Chicago and those people are kind of funny anyway.

**Question:** Have you been back to Europe since the war has ended?

**Answer:** Well, yeah, I went back there and flew on the Berlin Airlift, and then when that ended, I went back again in 1951, '54 and was stationed there with a radar outfit on the west side of the Rhine in the French zone.

**Question:** So is there any time at all that you were scared when you were flying B-26's?

**Answer:** No, I really can't -- I really can't say that I was ever - ever frightened.

**Question:** Not even when that engine went out, huh?

**Answer:** No.

**Question:** Too busy feathering that --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah, I never had any real strange things happen in that airplane. I know at Barksdale one time I took an airplane up with a training crew and the trim tab, as you gain speed, you roll the trim tab forward, keep the nose down. And of course as you slow down then, reduce speed, from landing, you nose up. Well, the trim tab was frozen, it wouldn't pull the nose up. So I put it forward a little bit and it stuck there and wouldn't come back. Every time it would go forward, it would not go back to its original position. And I couldn't figure -- anyway, I just went around the traffic pattern and landed, and the co-pilot and I both had to -- without trim tab, had to hold the stick back to -- to land the airplane. Took both of us to do it. And I took the airplane over and turned it in, there's something wrong with that trim tab. And, I guess the ground crews came out and checked it out and, well, as soon as we got on the ground, too, I rolled it and hell, it worked good, sitting on the ground. But I turned it in, wrote it up as something back wrong with it. And that afternoon they put another crew in that



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airplane and they went out with it and crashed it about six miles from the base. And it must have been something that the -- when the forces on the aircraft are on the wings instead of the landing gear, that something was binding that trim tab. But they had the same problem with it, they -- they -- but they chose to put it in a field out there instead. But I never had any problem with the airplane. Just -- just treated me real good.

**Question:** When you were stationed over in Dijon, did -- did you lose a lot of B-26's after that or --

**Answer:** Oh, we had a few. Had some ... yeah, occasionally we'd lose one. He'd get shot and have to go down or limp home or something. I -- this one guy, name was Sorrels -- the sorriest officer you ever saw in your life. He didn't know how to wear a uniform, he didn't know how to salute, he didn't know anything. (laughs) Sorrels. He drank quite a bit, too. And in fact, but he was a flight leader, sometime he'd been through a lot of them. (laughs) And -- but he'd get on an airplane with a hangover, boy, he'd fly it steady though. He was the easiest one of all to follow. He was really good. I liked to fly on his wing. Old Sorrels. Sorrels had been down through southern France -- he'd been down for the long while. And the anti-aircraft gunners in southern France had shot down several of our B-26s. When we got up there at Dijon, we had a lot of prisoners, working around the camp, cleaning up stuff and cooking and doing whatever. And they wore white coveralls. And there was a big red-headed German there that Sorrels, some way or another, figured out that this red-headed German had been an anti-aircraft gunner down at Marseille, France. And was responsible for some of the havoc raised there. So Sorrels would get drunk and go get his 45 and go looking for that big German. And he'd find him somewhere and put that 45 up in his nose like that and start cussing him. Well the poor German would just sweat, you know, he knew any time that drunk was going to pull the trigger. He'd have the hammer back on that 45. And we were egging him on. Oh, go ahead, Sorrels, pull it, pull it, Sorrels. (laughs) And that German, I know he never slept a good night since that time. For that fool American there, going to blow his head off with that 45. Sorrels was funny. And, but anyway, he -- he got shot down and he landed in a -- bailed out and landed in a muddy, plowed field or something. And he wasn't quite sure if he was in the American side or the German side. And he wasn't quite sure where he was, but he had a camera with, so he got out of the harness and he starts through this mud over to a nearby road. And he, hell, he remembered his camera, got pictures in there, don't dare let those Germans get the pics. So he took the film out and stomped them into the mud. Then he goes on, got right up near this road, and American jeep came by. And he says, oh, hell, he's on the right side. So he went back to get his film and his camera out of the mud, and he's out there picking that up and another jeep came by, said, hey, get out of there, that place is a mine field out there. So Sorrels said he took about four steps back to that road and abandoned his camera and film in the mud. Anyway they took him to Army hospital over there, dispensary. I think he had a couple little chips or something, didn't even get a stitch. But he got -- the Army gave a purple heart there. Then he got back to our outfit and -- he got back to us in about a week, and our outfit gave him another purple heart. For all the same thing.

But when a guy got shot down over there, a premium possession was blankets, blankets, GI blankets. We slept on those cots, canvas cots, and would get as many blankets as you could underneath and put your sleeping bag on top of that. So some people had six, eight blankets there. So when a guy got shot down, it was a race back to his tent to grab his stuff -- you get his liquor, you get his cigarettes, and get those blankets. And if his uniforms fit, you get them. Cause somebody's got to have them. Well Sorrels came back and he had nothing left. After a week. And he was raising hell around there. You bunch of vultures. But of course he had done the same thing. That's why he had eight blankets -- he'd been doing the same thing.

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**Question:** So did you ever have anybody that didn't come back that you knew real well or --

**Answer:** That did not?

**Question:** Yeah.

**Question:** I don't believe so. No, one of our other fellow -- Hildebrand was his name. He got shot down toward the end of the war and he bailed out and was captured by a German medical unit. Battalion or something. And that battalion was retreating so the colonel in charge of that battalion, the colonel, took him as a personal hostage. Prisoner. And they went up into the Bavarian woods somewhere, Austrian Alps, somewhere up there, where that colonel had his battalion. But he had every meal with that colonel, that commander. So he ate just like that colonel did. And -- and had no guard on him or anything. And one day up there in the woods that colonel told him, he said hey, you go right down here always, take my fishing tackle, go down and see if you can catch us some trout for supper. So Hildebrand goes down there and fishes two, three hours, got some trout. Brought them back and the German cook cooked them up for them. And a few days later he said take my Mauser and get us a deer. So he went out there and he said, hell, he had three rounds of ammunition and a gun, and Switzerland wasn't too far away. He says, hell, I'm leaving. I got a weapon now, I'll head for the border. Then he thought some more, he says, Christ, that's dumb. I'm being treated - - I'm eating with the commander here. Hell, I eat better here than I do at home. I better stay here, and he did. Stayed there. But he said he -- he had a good time there with the Germans, eating well. And then a few days an American column came through so the colonel took his prisoner and went down and met the -- with a white flag, and went down and met the American column and turned his prisoner over.

**Question:** So when you had combat losses, you got back and part of your box had gone down or -- did -- how did that affect people on the base?

**Answer:** I'm not sure -- really thought a hell of a lot about it. I don't know why. Isn't that strange?

**Question:** This one Wehrmacht soldier that we talked to -- he, his book, said that after having gotten to the Russian front a noncommissioned officer had said something to him about death and the war and their situation and that he -- he just figured what was go.. what would happen would happen and that he wasn't going to worry.

**Answer:** Well, I never thought the process through to that degree. I just -- I don't know. I suppose every 20, 21-year-old feels the same way, you know, he's -- nothing can happen to him. You know, like you see these guys out here on their motorcycles and fast cars and stuff, you know. Happens to somebody else, but never happen to me. And I never had any idea that I would ever, ever get hurt in that war. Never did. No idea

**Answer:** Other guys would but not me. I guess that's a survival instinct or something, huh? I don't know.

**Question:** So when you flew in the Berlin Airlift, what were you flying? You weren't flying your B-26 then?

**Answer:** No, no, that was a commercial DC4 or Air Force C54. Four engine transport.

**Question:** And flying into what, Templehof

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**Answer:** No, we flew into a French field called Gatau on the west outskirts of Berlin. And I was on a British base up near Hanover in the British zone and we flew -- let's see, I think we were about an hour into Berlin and an hour, and an hour, 15 minutes back. And we flew two a day. Two trips a day.

**Question:** What did you think about those flights and the purpose behind them?

**Answer:** Oh, I -- I liked it. I enjoyed it because it was all precision and all clockwork. And I felt I was doing something good and something unusual. I think we were landing an airplane about every minute, or every two minutes, I don't remember just what it was. The guy on the other end of the runway -- he would just be off the runway when we were landing on this end so it was pretty fast.

**Question:** And a fast unload and --

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah, we -- we never shut the engines off to unload. We flew coal, just coal, I think hundred pound sacks of coal. And had all the windows taken out in the cargo area

**Answer:** All those windows were out. Cold.

**Question:** Why did they take the windows out?

**Answer:** For ventilation.

**Question:** For in case of explosion, the coal dust?

**Answer:** Well, that coal dust would filter through and then the belly of the airplanes, when they'd overhaul these airplanes at the depot, they found as much as a ton of coal dust in the belly of these airplanes. And that stuff is like gunpowder, you know, it's very volatile. So anyway it was cold and we only -- I think we flew into Berlin at, something like 2500 feet and out at 3500, never any high altitude, but night, day, all kinds of weather.

**Question:** So that didn't bother you, supplying an old enemy with -- at that point?

**Answer:** Oh, no, didn't even think about it. We were more concerned with Russians then because the Russians were, you know, they'd come and harass us once in awhile, just fly along beside or something, but not --

**Question:** Never take a shot at you?

**Answer:** Oh, no, oh, no. No, I can't -- I enjoyed flying airlift, though. We landed that airplane, didn't know if we were on the ground until we felt it. Fly it right to the ground. And I'm not sure they do that now even.

**Question:** So you'd come in real fast then?

**Answer:** No, no, just the normal speed. But we had -- I'll say one good thing about the Brits. We had the British radar -- ground control units -- GCA's, and they were handling the -- our landings, and they did a good job of it. Lead us right to the ground. And calm. Never, never -- (end of videotape -- continued on Tape 90)