

Kay Flinders Interview

Interviewer: All right, Mr. Flinders, we're honored to have you here at the KUED studios today--

Kay Flinders: Thank you.

Interviewer: --and appreciate you coming up and talking about your war experiences. Can you give us -- can you remember where you were when you first heard the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and what you were doing and how that led you getting into the war?

Kay Flinders: Yes, I was 20 years old and I was in Tucson, Arizona working for the Western Electric Company installing telephone central offices at Monthan Air Force Base. And I thought, "Well, I guess I won't have to go in because I am in an industry that's in communications," and found out later, nope, that was not a way to get out of the draft. So I left Western and went back to -- came back to Salt Lake. I checked with the draft board and my number was right around the corner and so I was looking for something where I could enlist. And I did enlist -- I went into the Glider Training Program at the University of Utah for three months. And then I went -- before I finished Ground School -- I finished my flight of 35 hours for a pilot license and then I was called in early. I went to the Santa Ana Cadet Replacement Center and went through all the tests and was classified as a bombardier. And a week later, orders came through that I was miscalled to the wrong service, and they shipped me off to Albuquerque, New Mexico to the Gliding Training Center. So that's where my military life started.

Interviewer: And you were--

Crew: Guys, I'm getting someone's cell phone.

Interviewer: I just turned mine off; I don't know if it made a noise.

Crew: Yeah, probably.

Kay Flinders: Mine's on.

Interviewer: Sorry about that. Yeah, you better turn them off.

Kay Flinders: Sorry about that.

Crew: Okay, we're rolling.

Interviewer: Okay, so Kay you were then going to Glider School.

Kay Flinders: Right.

Interviewer: Tell us about that.

Kay Flinders: Well, they placed us in a tent city, all of us. The group that I was with at the University of Utah was there already when I arrived after being in the Santa Ana Air Cadet Training. So we all got together again, and there we were in tent city living along the airstrip waiting for our first actual flight school. We had a lot of time to waste because they weren't ready for us and so we did a lot of things. Another fellow and I joined the, the airbase football team and took a couple of trips playing football -- Wichita Kansas and one of the other places. When we got back from that, then we had a school come up in Tucumcari, New Mexico on Highway 66 East, and that was our first glider school. I had 35 hours in stick time, but we started our actual glider training at that time. So that was an unusual experience.

Interviewer: So what would you do -- get in these, be towed up in gliders and then they'd release you?

Kay Flinders: No, this was a pre-glider training. We'd climb up to 5,000 feet, do maneuvers, warm up and practice our maneuvers, and then we cut the power off the airplane and we'd glide back down 3,000 feet and then line up to make a landing dead stick. And we did that for about six to eight weeks. And then, after we finished that, we went back to Albuquerque to tent city, our wonderful home base, and then we waited another two months. And in the interim time, I signed up for a glider repair course in Wichita, Texas. And of course, the big transport gliders were all fabric and aluminum tubing. So I learned how to patch the fabric on those there gliders. When I got back, the other school was ready we went to another town in New Mexico -- can't remember where it was, where Billy the kid was buried right in the middle of the winter in January. We had frontline accommodations -- nothing fancy at all. We washed our own mess kits, slept in our wool flying suits, and no latrine facilities. Just a wash basin and a building -- it was frontline troops.

Interviewer: How long were you there?

Kay Flinders: There about, uh, six to eight weeks. Then we went back to Albuquerque, and about two weeks after that, they announced that the glider program had been scrubbed. And I thought, "What will we do now?" We got another list of things that we could volunteer for, and on that list was air cadet. And naturally, I signed up for that and from then on I went in to Air Cadet School in San Antonio, Texas, went through the three stages of flight training and, uh, ended up in Lubbock, Texas where I got my pilot training and commission. Then I was called to go to Tarrant Field in Forth Worth where they trained pilots on four-engine bombers and spent about six to eight weeks there training and developing our skills. And then, I was ready to be given a crew. So I went to Wichita Falls, Kansas where I got my assignment with all of our crew

and we ended up at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho. There we spent another six to eight weeks training a crew shooting at towed targets and bombing x's in the desert out west of Boise.

Interviewer: You were flying B-24s at that time then?

Kay Flinders: Yes, had all 10 of us in a crew -- five gunners and five officers. And, uh, so then we went to the next Replacement Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, and they assigned us to go to Europe -- the European Theatre. Then we were put on a troop train. We went through Detroit, up to Canada, and down to Boston. I don't know why that was not a direct route, but that's where we went to Boston. We were loaded on a transport ship in Mount Vernon, sailed across the Atlantic in eight to ten days, zigzagging all the way, and landed in Liverpool. I was assigned to the 448th bomb group of the 713th or 714th bomb squadron. We about 10 years ago decided as a crew to put together a little booklet on what our experiences were. But there, we trained again to learn the lay of the land, and then we flew 25 missions from January through April.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Can I look at that?

Kay Flinders: So then when we came home, we flew our airplane home, all 10 of us plus 10 ground crew people and all of our gear. So we crossed the Atlantic and landed in Boston where we'd taken off. Then we were given 30 days leave and came back. I was assigned to be a B-29 pilot, and then the war ended.

Interviewer: Let's go back -- did you have any close calls while you were training?

Kay Flinders: Just a few.

Interviewer: Tell us about those.

Kay Flinders: Yeah, on my first mission, my engineer, who was in charge of keeping track of all of the gas consumption, our weight, and everything, took off his oxygen mask at 22,000 feet and had lost his orientation. So I had to leave the flying up to the copilot and go back and see if I could get him back on his oxygen mask. And we survived that, and he never did get full oxygen all the time. But we dropped our bombs and headed back and went down to lower altitude so we could get better oxygen. And that was the scariest part, being on the number one flight on a bombing mission. And then we, uh, we had a couple other things. We ran out of gas over Germany and had to make an emergency landing in Belgium with a full bomb load. And that was successful. We stayed overnight, gassed up, and went back to our airbase in England in East Anglia. And then another thing, we came back from a mission and my right landing gear folded. We did a cart wheel, not a cart wheel, but a spiral turned 360 degrees a couple times down the run way.

Interviewer: Did you have fighter escorts during that period?

Kay Flinders: We did.

Interviewer: The whole way of the mission?

Kay Flinders: No, about the middle, right in the middle of our combat missions, they had wing tanks, and so they could go all the way with us. Up until that time, the Germans really got after us with fighters, and the "ack-ack" guns. So, a lot of airplanes -- that book will tell you all about the different things that happened on our missions.

Interviewer: That's what we want to hear, some of those stories from you.

Kay Flinders: So, anyway, as we fly over -- a thousand airplanes flying over a target -- we'd see planes taking off, dropping in altitude and we'd wait and watch and see how many bailed out.

Very few got bailed out because of the centrifugal force as that airplane went down. It wouldn't just go down, it wouldn't glide, it would go down in a spiral so it was difficult for anyone to get out of an airplane. And so we'd count, one, two, three, and maybe that was it. And, uh, some of them would crash land. They would make it down so they would hit hard enough that they couldn't fly in and land somewhere in Germany and they were captured. But it's -- we had a lot of flack. It was a black sky with smoke and puffs of powder.

Interviewer: So during those early missions when fight escorts would only go half way with you, would the German fighter planes just wait until they dropped off and then you were at their mercy basically?

Kay Flinders: They did. One time, we were -- we noticed coming right down out of the sun some of these jet fighters and they came on right down through our formation and I always flew deputy lead ship, next to the leader, and they went right down through the middle of our squadron shooting their canons. They didn't get anyone, but they scared the daylights out of us. And so we just kept on going, but then other folk -- or fok-something.

Interviewer: Focke-Wulf fighters, yeah.

Kay Flinders: Focke-Wulf fighters would come up at us and our gunners would shoot at them. We got a couple of kills out of those. Then one time, one of our own bombers just missed us, and there's a picture in that book showing those bombs coming down through right in front of our airplane. If we'd been another second further ahead, you wouldn't be hearing this story. But those things happened all the way through our missions -- different groups, different squadrons.

It was -- we didn't have time to think about the danger. We are there just to save ourselves and do the job that was given us.

Interviewer: How old were you at the time?

Kay Flinders: I was 24.

Interviewer: And what was the average age of your crew?

Kay Flinders: When I got my crew, the youngest one was 18. He was the navigator. And I had one gunner who was one year older than I was. So the rest all were in between.

Interviewer: So at 24, you and the gunner were the old men, uh, of the crew.

Kay Flinders: Yes.

Interviewer: All right, well, on some of those missions that you flew -- maybe you've already told us -- what do you consider the most dangerous one?

Kay Flinders: Um, the most dangerous one is when we went to Denmark and it was all overcast and we couldn't see the target or find it. So we took the alternate target, which was the Kiel Canal. That was the submarine base for the German submarine corps. And so we bombed them and they got several of us at that time. We flew right down through the heavy concentration of those submarines and they had a heavy defense system. And that was the scariest because we didn't know -- we had no briefing on what was there. We had no briefing on how to defend ourselves from -- they didn't know what the full impact would be. So that was the scariest.

Other missions were pretty calm in comparison. So, I guess, they were all a little bit surprising sometimes.

Interviewer: And in those early years, you weren't flying into Berlin at that time, were you?

Kay Flinders: We made one trip to Berlin. But other squadrons and groups went to Berlin. What we do is take a thousand airplanes that form up over the North Sea, and we all had our target assignments we'd been briefed on, each section of our thousand airplanes. And they then, after we formed, we took off into a certain point where we'd make a particular turn toward our target. So the thousand airplanes would be scattered all over Germany. They wouldn't be in one direction. One time, we, we had over 800 in one line, just going over Germany continuously. And that was quite a site -- to look out and see all those airplanes headed for one target. It was rail yards, of course, and factories that were there in conjunction with them.

Interviewer: How accurate was the bombing?

Kay Flinders: They did what we call scatter bombing. We'd start at one side of the bomb target and as we dropped our bombs, the lead airplane would drop his bombs and then the planes following him would trigger their bombs to be released so it just made a pattern right through the target. So we obliterated every target that we went after. There wasn't much chance of missing the target. Not everybody's bombs hit right in the middle, but it was blanket coverage. So it was pretty devastating to the area where we bombed.

Interviewer: How long were those missions, the average mission length?

Kay Flinders: Uh, they were between seven and eight hours without food, sometimes we had a drink, but it would freeze, so we couldn't drink it. So we didn't have nourishment for that seven or eight hours.

Interviewer: And are there any missions that stand out as far as their interest. You told us the most dangerous one in Denmark. Are there any others that were particularly interesting because of where they were, or--

Kay Flinders: Yes, we went to Berchtesgaden, where Hitler's hideout was, and we bombed that. And that was a spectacular sight. We didn't have any opposition, so it was kind of like a milk run. But we dropped bombs and we accomplished the mission. But what a beautiful area, that Bavarian area is.

Interviewer: How many planes did they send to bomb Berchtesgaden?

Kay Flinders: They probably sent, maybe 150. That's two groups.

Interviewer: That's interesting. They must have restored it then--

Kay Flinders: Oh, I'm sure they did.

Interviewer: --because, and then you bombed the heck out of it, but Hitler was not there at the time obviously.

Kay Flinders: They thought he was.

Interviewer: They did?

Kay Flinders: Yeah.

Interviewer: That is interesting.

Elizabeth: So what did you feel like when you thought maybe he was there and you bombed it?

Kay Flinders: Well, you know, you can't see much at 20 or 25,000 feet in the air. So, it was just a beautiful sight and we just drop our little toys right on top of it, and then took off, went back to our home base. So it wasn't like we were involved in shooting at each other.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kay Flinders: It was such a distance between the ground and where we were located at twenty-something thousand feet. So it was when you are too busy flying an airplane. I had an experience when we -- after the war, the 8th Air Force has a museum down in Savannah, Georgia. We have a reunion every year of our 448th Bomb Group. We were down there the year it was dedicated, and they had a mock up of a bomb run. And of course, I was always busy flying and keeping track of everything and making things so that they worked right as far as our plane was concerned. And, uh, that mock up had everything very descriptive of everything that took place during a bomb run. Of course, my gunners were sitting back there waiting in case a fighter would come, or whatever, so that they could help protect the bomb group. So I didn't notice what was going on except the reports that came in from the crew members. And when I went through that mock-up, I was really emotional about what was going on. And I sobbed for about 15 or 20 minutes after that thing was over because I didn't realize the anxiety it had caused my crew members because they never said anything. And we were such a close knit crew that it, uh, they never talked about how they were affected. We were just interested in getting the job done and getting back home. So experiences like that were real eye-openers as to what's going on, even though you're in the middle of it.

Interviewer: Have you had any other of those missions that you would like to mention that had some interesting parts to them?

Kay Flinders: Well, we had our bombs hang up one time. They wouldn't drop out of the bomb bay. And, uh, so our engineer had to go back and walk along a cat walk and the whole bottom of the airplane doors were all open. So he had to hang on and go in and trip each one of them so that they dropped. So those bombs didn't get very close to the target, but that was something that happened from time to time. We flew another mission down to France where there was a general who stayed in a city down along the coast of France, and he didn't give up. The ground troops didn't spend any time trying to capture him because he wasn't doing anybody any harm and so we went down and bombed that installation and we had napalm bombs, you know, these liquid bombs, and we dropped them over the whole compound. So I don't know what the results were, but it must have been a terrible thing to receive those napalm bombs on probably whole regiment of soldiers in France. Those things kind of bother you. You think, "Well, that's a horrible way to be annihilated." And so, those are interesting things that happened from time to time that you don't realize it until you start talking about it. As a crew, we go to reunions and we talk about it and you wouldn't believe how many times we told the same story differently.

Interviewer: (Laughter).

Kay Flinders: And, uh, it was a great thing to get together and go through all the things that we'd experienced.

Interviewer: I'm sure that is. Tell us about your last mission.

Kay Flinders: The last, uh, the last mission -- I'd have to look in my book.

Interviewer: That would be the 25th mission.

Kay Flinders: The 25th mission -- that was the 25th of April in 1945. I have forgotten what the target was, but it was what we'd call a "milk run" because there wasn't any opposition at that time. And May 5th was "V-E Day."

Interviewer: And you still had those flak bursts, didn't you?

Kay Flinders: Yes, a gun or two here and there, but nothing devastating. I think all the airplanes came back safely. But it was quite a quiet thing and we knew that something was going on, that this was pretty close to the end. We all had that feeling.

Interviewer: And did you know -- did the crew know that this was their last mission?

Kay Flinders: No, not until May 5th. They didn't announce it.

Interviewer: Right, but completed your 25--

Kay Flinders: Right. Headquarters didn't tell us what was coming up. Of course, it was all in the works that that was going to be the day that they signed the treaty, on May 5th. So we just stayed in our quarters for that two weeks, about. And then we got the word, and, of course, May 5th was like the Fourth of July -- fireworks shooting off, shooting off our flare guns and making all kinds of noise and everything. So, it was really a celebration.

Interviewer: So you were there in England at your base--

Kay Flinders: Yes.

Interviewer: --after you'd flown 25 missions.

Kay Flinders: Right. No one had flown for two weeks, so we knew something was about to happen.

Interviewer: Yeah. What about having to go to Japan? Were they getting you prepared to go over there to fight in that battle?

Kay Flinders: Yes, if the war had kept going, I would have gone to Japan flying a B-29.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kay Flinders: The bigger B-17. And, uh, so I don't know, I didn't think a whole lot about it except we wanted to get it done and over with. There was a lot of spiritual feelings we had about accomplishing our mission and coming home. It's not something you dwell on, you keep busy and you are always training and developing your skills. Between missions in England, we shot skeet, we had firing ranges, and we had different skill facilities that we practiced in. In the middle of our 25 missions, we had what they called a "flak leave." Each crew had a week's flak leave, and the officers went to a mansion down in Southern England where it was nice and warm. We spent a week just doing whatever we wanted to do. We wore civilian clothes they furnished us and we relaxed. My five gunners or crew members went to another one called Pangbourne on the Thames River, but they did much the same thing as we did. But it was just a time to relax and get rid of the tensions that built up. So that was -- that was a good thing that they did that because some of the fellows were really affected by the pressures, thinking about shooting at them. Any minute you might get hit yourself and be a casualty or have to bail out or whatever. So that was a good time to relax and get a good start on the next segment of your missions

Interviewer: Where were you when in August when the Japanese surrendered?

Kay Flinders: I was in Amarillo, Texas, out in nowhere.

Interviewer: So you went back to the States after--

Kay Flinders: Yeah, had 30 day -- all of us had 30 day leave, and then reassigned. And, uh, I was reassigned at Amarillo, Texas.

Interviewer: And had the work continued, you'd likely have flown B-29s there.

Kay Flinders: Very definitely I would have, until it finished.

Interviewer: How do you compare the B-24 to the B-17?

Kay Flinders: Well, the B-17 was an altogether different airplane. It was a tricycle landing, tail-landing, so to speak. The B-24 was up front or whatever -- I've forgot gotten the term that they might use. But it was a different plane to fly. The B-24 carried a heavier load. A little bit slower in speed maybe, but it carried a bigger load. It was more reliable airplane in many instances, but both of them performed very well, accomplished the mission they were designed for and they just had different capabilities.

Interviewer: If you were to say something to future generations about World War II and your interpretation of it, and the sacrifices you made, and the sacrifices that were made, what would you say?

Kay Flinders: Well, if we're in war, we have to protect ourselves. So, the thing is, we have to set our mind to the job that has to be done. If we think about what we have to do, we're not going to be successful. We might even lose our life because we're not very controlled in our actions in what we do. It's a serious business. It's not some fun thing. And some crew members couldn't go through all their full missions in Europe. They had to be sent home or whatever. So, you have to go in with the right attitude, believe that you're a child of God, and that you're important

and that he loves you and that he wants you to do the right thing, in spite of how bad something may appear to be. So, you have to be aware of your weaknesses and use your strength and get the job done because you need to get home and be with your family.

Interviewer: Well, we sure appreciate your service and appreciate you coming up here.

Elizabeth, have you got any questions you'd like to ask?

Elizabeth: I do. Why did that one crew member of yours take his oxygen mask off?

Interviewer: Talk to me when you answer.

Kay Flinders: It was just uncomfortable for him. It fits right over your mouth and nose and, it's like you're suffocating. He just couldn't be comfortable with it, and then he'd take it off and then he'd put it back on. And each time, he'd lose more oxygen. So, he just was uncomfortable, and he just wouldn't stick with it, which is what you have to do when something comes up. You just have to overcome it.

Elizabeth: Did he do that again?

Kay Flinders: No, no, he didn't (laughter). He got used to it and he was I don't know how he felt -- whether it was comfortable or not -- but he stuck with it.

Interviewer: You know, in Hollywood films, we see these bomb crews that were happy-go-lucky, joking kind of guys. And I guess they were like it, but deep down inside, there was a lot of apprehension and fear, I would imagine. What would you say?

Kay Flinders: Yeah, there was. Some of them -- that was a front, to be able to take a bomb run and survive it mentally. But there were a lot that spent time in the hospital recovering from that fear and trepidation that they went through. But they -- a lot of the serviceman, when they'd

finish a mission, we had a chance to go to London about every two weeks on a weekend. And some of them would just go and get drunk and forget about the whole thing. And they must have had a miserable life overall trying to cope with their situations. So, it was all -- there were all kinds of situations for the military. I think my crew was a strong crew. We were close together. We worked together. We talked about going home. We talked about the things that we're doing there that would get us home soon. So we had a good attitude. Positive in our thinking and we shared each other's fun and some disappointments in life, but it was a good, tight crew. And that was important. There wasn't a lot of military regimen that went on in our crew. We were all equal, and I think that was one of the secrets of our doing the job we did and not having any difficulties otherwise.

Interviewer: Did you say that one time you had to land with only one gear?

Kay Flinders: Well, the gear collapsed on us. After we landed, it just folded up.

Interviewer: And--

Kay Flinders: The wing went in to the ground and we did a couple of spirals.

Interviewer: And that was it?

Kay Flinders: That was it. No one was hurt, and—

Interviewer: You were lucky there--

Kay Flinders: --so we were lucky. There were all kind of things. We had a couple planes that took off with a full bomb load. We had short run ways -- just enough to take off -- and a couple of them didn't make it and crashed at the end with all those bombs. Makes a hole about 20 feet deep and no one survives, of course.

Interviewer: Well, was the belly gunner in there during your landing?

Kay Flinders: No, they eventually eliminated the belly gun. In the B-17, they didn't.

Interviewer: In the B-24, they did, so--

Kay Flinders: No belly turret there at all. It wasn't that effective of a position to shoot at an enemy. It just didn't accomplish that much. So they eliminated them and made it a lot better -- lightened the load and we could carry another couple of bombs that we hadn't normally been able to. So it was a good thing they did that.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Elizabeth: Describe what it's like to fly through flak.

Kay Flinders: Well, these little black puffs come up all the time. And the shell is set for an altitude, and so when it gets to that altitude -- they shoot some high and some low. They can kind of tell where we are in that spectrum, so they shoot up a lot of it so that they have a good distinguishing look at what our position is. And then the next round that comes up -- we always know when that's going to happen. Someone will always say on the crew, "Watch out for the next one." We knew what they were trying to do, and it was thick. It was like trying to fly through a hail storm, a light hail storm because there was -- so many guns that shot their ammo up there. So it was pretty scary. We were hit several times with shrapnel. Never had a direct hit, but we came home one time with 18 shrapnel holes in our airplane. Most of the planes got hit with shrapnel on every mission, so it wasn't something that was just happen chance. It was deadly serious about what they were doing.

Interviewer: And shrapnel is the same as flack--

Kay Flinders: The same as flack, yes. It's a portion of the shell--

Interviewer: Right.

Kay Flinders: --hat, when it bursts, it goes in all directions. And some, some flack, some shots went right through airplanes and then exploded on the other side because it was fixed for a certain altitude. Not very many, but enough of them it was a possibility for anybody to get hit directly.

Interviewer: And you never had any penetrate the inside of the air craft?

Kay Flinders: No, I have one little piece of flack that's about three quarters of an inch in diameter, a ragged piece that that I saved as a souvenir. We dug it out of the padding in the airplane because we could hear it when it zinged through the cabin of the airplane. A lot of us had that -- we all had our pieces of shrapnel.

Elizabeth: Did it shake the airplane?

Kay Flinders: Yes it did. It was rough. It was like going through rough air on a regular airplane. When you go on a flight from here to Chicago, you'll hit come rough air from here to Las Vegas. That shaking of up-drafts, it was about the same thing.

Interviewer: When you get holes on the outside of your airplane, was your plane harder to control?

Kay Flinders: No, not unless it hit some control cable or surface that was vital, and it was a big hole.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kay Flinders: But when we dropped our bombs, it was just like a shell had exploded underneath us. The dropping of those 8,000 pounds of bombs. Our airplane would rise, probably, uh, 50 feet or something.

Interviewer: You were at 25,000 feet, you'd feel--

Kay Flinders: We'd feel the lightness of the airplane. And those shells would do the same thing to us. We wouldn't move that much, but it would bump us up just like a rough air.

Interviewer: Uh. Anything else?

Elizabeth: I'm good, how about you?

Interviewer: Well, we really do appreciate you coming up here, Kay. Thank you for your service.

Kay Flinders: I'm glad I'm here to talk about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, well, your memory seems real good, so we really appreciate you coming up and for your service to your country. That's what we're here to do -- try to make the other future generations remember the sacrifices that were made.

Kay Flinders: I'm glad they're putting out all this stuff. The History Channel puts out a lot of things that--

Interviewer: Yeah

Kay Flinders: --I didn't know anything about.

Interviewer: And check out our free--

End of recording.