

Interview of Kenneth Porter

Interviewer: What's your full name?

Kenneth Porter: Kenneth Porter.

Interviewer: And you're born where?

Kenneth Porter: I was born out of Delta, Utah, about five miles, in 12/12/25.

Interviewer: You told me some interesting stories about Delta before you joined the Air Force.

What was in Delta and inspired you to join the Air Force?

Kenneth Porter: Well, the first B-17 I saw came over Delta. I said, "That's for me." I was just a freshman or a sophomore, but when we were little boys, my brother and I always made these little airplanes out of balsa wood with a rubber elastic for the propeller to drive the propeller and I'd always been interested in airplanes and when I saw that B-17, why--

Interviewer: We've got to start all over again.

Crew Member: Thanks, sorry about that.

Interviewer: No problem.

Crew Member: We're ready.

Interviewer: Your full name.

Kenneth Porter: My full name is Kenneth Porter.

Interviewer: You're from?

Kenneth Porter: I'm from Delta, Utah.

Interviewer: And you grew up there?

Kenneth Porter: I grew up there until I went in the military.

Interviewer: And tell us the story when you first saw some airplanes that really interested you.

Kenneth Porter: Well, the 17 interested me, the first one I saw. Besides that, we had a high school teacher by the name of Grant Snow who, we had this aviation class and we had done quite a bit about aviation, and then when they started bringing 17s over there for gunnery and they weren't supposed to be that far south out of Wendover up there. Anyway, the first one I saw, I said, "I want to be on one of those," and I worked very hard to get there.

Interviewer: What was in Delta that you saw these airplanes? Tell us about what was

Kenneth Porter: Well, we had a pretty good sized airport. It's got one of the longest runways in the state of Utah, I think it's a 9,000 foot runway. They used to bring A-20s, B-24s that were ferrying to different areas, and occasionally we did lose one A-20 that crashed. A lot of the Canadians, there were Canadian pilots, and there were, I think there were some women pilots that brought some in through there, in the 24s. But the 17, we had a 17 come in there when I was a junior, and they lost one engine, and so they had an emergency landing there and, of course, later on, I thought that was quite funny.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Kenneth Porter: Because, when we were flying these several missions, we came back on two engines, and the one we came back on one.

Interviewer: So that's rather--

Kenneth Porter: So losing one was, of course, if you were in the formation and loaded with bombs and a full load of gas, why, you would lag behind the formation, and that is when you would get taken out by fighters.

Interviewer: We're going to get to that. I want to get to one story before that -- your knees in high school and how that figured into your military career.

Kenneth Porter: Well, when I was a junior, I was playing left guard on the football team and the last play of the season, I injured my left knee. The cartilage was so torn apart that I had to move it with my fingers to keep it from folding up. So I spent all summer between my junior and senior year exercising it and working on it so I could get in as a cadet because at that time they had these advertisements, "You too can wear silver wings." I wanted that pair of silver wings and so I went in, I finally got permission from my parents after dogging them for better than a year, I finally got them to sign a waiver for me to go in at 17, but I had to have good grades. I had to be in perfect physical condition, I had to have three letters of recommendation, and pass all the tests that were given by the Air Force. I went into Fort Douglas, and they went through a series of tests and then they said I was okay and, but I had to go in before my 18th birthday.

Interviewer: So you tried for pilot school, is that correct?

Kenneth Porter: I tried to -- I wanted to be a pilot, and I passed all the tests, up to the psychologist. The psychologists are not exactly dumb, that was the last thing you had to pass. You went in there and the first thing they did was shake hands with you. If you were a bit nervous, the palms of your hands will sweat, and he detected that and the next morning, when they came up, the results came up, he said I was too nervous to be a pilot.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Kenneth Porter: I cried. I cried real tears, because I felt so bad. But, I said to myself, "Okay, self. You've got a problem here." So I resolved at that time to be the best soldier that I could be, and it paid off very well because that was on a Friday afternoon, and Sunday morning, I was on my way to Kingman, Arizona to gunnery school. I did my best all the time I was in gunnery school.

Interviewer: So you went through gunnery school and when did you get assigned to an airplane?

Kenneth Porter: I got assigned to an airplane, the first part of May 1944. We went to Plant Park, Tampa, Florida, and that was a horse -- our barracks were horse barns. You could still smell the horse puckie. We picked up the enlisted part of our crew there and then they sent us to Gulfport, Mississippi, where they picked up the officers and we had a very good crew. Our pilot, when he got out of four engine transition was rated superior. Our navigator was at the top of his class, our bombardier had been a bombardier instructor, and he could, from 20,000 feet, he could come awfully close to hit a 25 x 25 barge in the Gulf of Mexico. Our co pilot was a tremendous individual. He couldn't land an airplane worth anything, but for crew cohesiveness, he couldn't have been better. I might tell you this. We had, on our crew, three Catholics, two Jewish fellows, a Christian Scientist, a Baptist, a Methodist, and myself. We got along very well. We were very cohesive and our pilot demanded the best from all of us, which he got because everybody, he could put a B-17 down and we landed on these steel matting. When he put that 17 down, you couldn't tell he landed till you could feel the vibration of the tires on that landing mat. He was that good.

Interviewer: So, how did you get assigned to tail gunner?

Kenneth Porter: I don't know, because I weighed about 145, 150 pounds, and that was just a little bit heavy. It was a good thing to be assigned to because I was the pilot's rear eyes. Everything that went on, why, he and I had a lot of communication. He, as I said before, I tried to do the best that I could and he appreciated it.

Interviewer: Before we get into the combat stories and getting to Italy, you were so important, they did something special with your communications, didn't he? He rigged up an extra device for you, didn't he?

Kenneth Porter: No, that wasn't the pilot, that's another story.

Interviewer: We'll get to that story later then.

Kenneth Porter: That was in combat.

Interviewer: Okay, alright, so tell us about getting to Italy and your first mission.

Kenneth Porter: Okay, we went to Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia and we were finished with our training and picked up a new B-17 and the last five, or the last three numbers were "555" on the seal number of it. We went from Savannah, Georgia to Grenier, New Hampshire, and there to Bangor, Maine and from there to Gander, Newfoundland. From there to the Azores and from there to Marrakech, North Africa. Now, we were originally assigned to go to India, and they changed our orders in Africa and they sent us to Tunis from Marrakech, then we went to Foggia, Italy, and that was a replacement depot. I have to tell you this. When we landed, we were taxiing over to the where they told us to put our airplane. And, right in front of us taxis this B-24 and went in from one end to the other on it and were in letters of about a foot high -- "Consolidated Mess". Of course, we didn't think too much of the B 24s, but we had quite a chuckle out of that.

From there, they took us by truck to Solone Field out of Foggia, Italy. They told us, we took over with us, we took about a ton and a half to two tons of K-rations, but they only got part of them. We put the rest in the truck with our baggage, and they were good to have, because

Interviewer: So, when you report to duty, you would have brought this overseas with you.

Kenneth Porter: Yes, and then they took it and it was supposed to have gone to the infantry, but they only got part of it. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So, tell us about your first mission.

Kenneth Porter: Okay, we did practice missions for a long time. And then, the first mission we flew was over to Yugoslavia. We flew with a pilot who had a lot of missions. That was part of the program, so they take part of your crew and we went to Marbourg, Yugoslavia, and the first mission we flew, we had a, an 88 come up and went through the end of the left wing and didn't explode. Had it exploded, it would have shot us down on our first mission. It went up and exploded above us.

Interviewer: So

Kenneth Porter: We decided at that time there was somebody there who did not like us and we were not welcome at all.

Interviewer: So, what were your -- do you remember your feelings of your first mission? What were you thinking or feeling the whole time?

Kenneth Porter: Scared the crap out of me. Anybody that tells you isn't scared is lying to you, and I don't care who it is. When that stuff starts coming up, I don't care who you are, it scares you.

Interviewer: Did you see any of the planes go down on that mission?

Kenneth Porter: I don't remember. I do not believe. I'd have to go and look at my Air Force record to see, but I do not believe that we lost one on that particular mission.

Interviewer: So, you started flying missions.

Kenneth Porter: We

Interviewer: Tell us progressively some of the things that happened.

Kenneth Porter: Well, we flew most of our flights were after oil refineries. They were the heaviest defended targets. For example, Ploesti, they had just finished polishing off Ploesti when we were over in Tunis. There was Ploesti, Berlin, Vienna, and Meersburg up in the northern part of Germany, that were the four most heavily defended targets in Europe. I got Vienna.

Interviewer: Excuse me, we have something flying around his head. A little gnat. It's going to drive everyone crazy. A minute ago, there was a gnat flying

Elizabeth: Lean over and smack it.

Interviewer: Because the camera will pick it up, barely.

Kenneth Porter: Yes.

Interviewer: All right, so, anyway, so we were talking about these long missions. You were really going a long ways, weren't you?

Kenneth Porter: Well, most of the missions lasted from seven and a half to nine hours. The air speed of the B-17 is about 165, loaded. Depending on whether you had a headwind or a tailwind

was your speed. Sometimes, if you went over a target, I remember one target we went over, our ground speed was 35 miles an hour.

Interviewer: Because of the headwind?

Kenneth Porter: Because of a headwind. The weather over the Alps was -- you'd ice up sometimes and a mess especially when we flew at night. Those were, that was very treacherous because you could ice up and then you didn't know exactly where you were and everything till you finally got to your target.

Interviewer: We're going to go into those night missions because they were towards the end of your tour.

Kenneth Porter: Well, they were about half way done.

Interviewer: Well, tell us about what you were doing. Tell us about the position you were in. You were telling me about your knees earlier. So I want you to tell about what a tail gunner in a B-17, how he has to sit for eight and a half hours.

Kenneth Porter: Well, we would go to 10,000 feet and then we would go to our positions while we were going up. We would go up to 10,000 feet and go into position and get our oxygen, and I would go back to the tail. I'd crawl back past the tail wheel, and that was the only way you'd get back there. I'd have to sit there on my knees on a bicycle seat all the time going backwards watching for anything that was not the way it was supposed to be, I reported the pilot. I might tell you, the up and down and back and forth that the tail gets, never once did I get air sick.

Interviewer: So, tell me about your knees in all of that.

Kenneth Porter: Well, the circulation in my feet, my feet would get cold and I'd never get over it and I still to this day, when it gets chilly, I have to put on long underwear because of my circulation, probably caused by so many hours on my knees in the tail.

Interviewer: Tell us about how cold it was.

Kenneth Porter: Well, it depended on where we were going and our altitude. At 31,000 feet over the Alps on one mission we flew, it was 72 degrees below zero. Ordinarily, it was anywhere from 45 to 60 below, but that one particular mission we got down to 72 below. One of my problems, also, when we'd go in on a target, I'd start sweating. By the time we got on the other side of the target, then my underwear would be wet and then I couldn't keep warm. So, though you had those kinds of problems, supposedly we had a heated suit, but it only worked part of the time and either wouldn't work at all or else it would burn you in a lot of places. We dressed in long underwear and then we put on our heated suit and then our regular uniform and then coveralls over that and then a big heavy suit over that in order to keep warm because anything you touched, if you had a bear skin, anything you touched, your skin would stay to it because of the cold. You touched a gun with your bare hand, why, it would take some of your hide with you. It was not that comfortable, and the skin of those B-17s and all those other planes were about the thickness of two beer cans, so they didn't stop much. When we'd go on a mission, we had a radioman who would have had two plates of armor there about 24 by 30. He'd get under his radio table and put just make a "V" and they'd be up against the bulkhead of the bomb bay. He spent quite a bit of time there and he got sick every mission. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So, did you have any armor protecting you?

Kenneth Porter: We just had, back where I was, no. The only thing we had, the tail window was thick Plexiglass, about two inches thick. Then you had a flack suit, and if you could sneak a piece of armor plate in, I had a few little pieces I'd carry in my parachute bag. I would sit over to the side of me, but that side of that, there was no armament. There was in the waist, the waist gun positions, there was a piece of armor plate that was about three by four on each side.

Interviewer: Tell me about the first mission you fired your guns at an enemy.

Kenneth Porter: We did very few missions to fire at anybody. I didn't fire at anybody till I'd flown about two thirds of my missions because, at that time, our main problem was not fighters - - it was flack. If you lost an engine -- one, two, engines -- why then you would lag behind the rest of the formation and that's when they would come in and take you out. We had a lot of good escorts. We had the 51s, the 47th, and the 38s, they were very much on the ball. If you got hit and straggled, why, you could call them and they would come in and try to protect you.

Interviewer: I heard one pilot refer to them as "little friends."

Interviewer: That's why you were always happy to see them. But, the P 51 and the 109 had almost the same silhouette. Whenever they'd come close to us, they would always come up, show their star on their wings and then some had fire at them, but there was one story they tell about this P-38 pilot that came into to formation for protection and somebody fired at him, so he started up his other engine that he'd been having problems with and he followed that group to the field and when he went down he asked who fired at him and they went over and smacked him, knocked him on his butt, then went over in his 38 and took off again.

Interviewer: So, the first time you fired your guns, do you remember that day?

Kenneth Porter: No, just, at least you could shoot back. It was exciting.

Interviewer: What was coming at you? What kind of plane?

Kenneth Porter: We had 109s.

Interviewer: Alright, let's get through some of these. You had some real fascinating tales about some missions. Tell us about the one -- you've got several here, you just pick one out. Tell us about the one where you crashed on takeoff.

Kenneth Porter: Well, that was about our 13th mission, as I remember. I think it was our 13th mission. We were going, it was our turn to take off, and we got to just right around 400 feet, somewhere between 350 and 400 feet and the two left engines quit. Of course, we started in down on kind of a 45 degree angle. I was in the waist there and I turned to one of the waist gunners and I said, "Your mother's going to get her Gold Star here in about five seconds" because about 95 percent of the time you crash one of the those full of bombs and gasoline, why, it blows up. We were extremely fortunate. When we hit the ground, the ball came up through the 17 and broke the back, all of it. When they finally came to a halt, we ended up in a little small swamp, and right in front of us was a great big dike. We stopped. Apparently, they had some kind of a drainage system or something. Anyway, I was the first one out at that time, all the power had been cut, but there was electrical power when it pushed the ball up, it short circuited it. There was sparks flying all over. I just figured we were gone and as soon as we stopped I went over and grabbed the escape cable and they had the handle and the pins going to the waist door. I grabbed that and knocked it to the ground and there was about six inches of water, and my first step was on that door and it was 15 feet to dry ground and I never got my feet wet. We took off as fast as we could run. Part of them went out one side and part of us went the

other side, and we got out. I waited for the copilot and we went out and counted 100 yards and we started to see if everybody had got out, and he stopped me and said, "We've got to go back." I said, "Aren't all of us here?" "We've got to go back, somebody's not -- I only count nine." I had to go over and grab him by the parachute harness. Here's the first lieutenant and staff sergeants, grabbed first lieutenants and shake them and I said, "Heaton, you're the 10th man. You're not counting yourself." He said, "Okay, I guess." Then we took off again because we still thought it was going to blow up, but it didn't.

Interviewer: It knocked off your tail turret?

Kenneth Porter: It knocked off the tail turret and it knocked off part of the left wing. Had it had been any closer to the left, to the main spar, it would have torn that wing off and then we would have been goners. That's what happens a lot of times, as the gasoline's as bad as the bombs.

Interviewer: Tell us about the mission where you had to throw your guns overboard.

Kenneth Porter: Well, that was towards the end of my tour. If you don't mind, I'll throw in a night mission.

Interviewer: Okay, do that.

Kenneth Porter: For Thanksgiving of '44, the Air Force thought they would be good to us. So we had turkey, but on the way over, it had got warm apparently and it had a lot of salmonella, and there was not, out of the whole bomb group of 700 fly boys, there were only 80 of us that could fly. So they put together some crews and we flew a night mission to Litz, Austria. When you get in those spotlights, it just scares the crap out of you because they can triangulate you and get your proper altitude. Anyway, we had one bomber blew up on takeoff. We had, out of the

eight that took off, that one that blew up on takeoff, one ditched near the Adriatic Sea, one ended up crash landing on the Italian coast just off the ocean, and five of us out of the eight got back safely.

Interviewer: Those were special B-17s, weren't they?

Kenneth Porter: Well, they had radar in them. This is, sometimes we bomb by radar and these are all radar planes that we flew on these missions and after that, they just say, "It's too much loss. We can't put up with this." So they quit the night missions. That was the last night mission.

Interviewer: So you were going to tell me about that mission where you had to throw--

Kenneth Porter: Well, that was later on. We went to what was supposed to have been a milk run. I think it was about my, I'm going over 30 at that time. We were supposed to go on this milk run to eastern Hungary. We were supposed to bomb a fighter airplane factory and then they had a big railroad because the Germans were taking all their stuff to the Russian front. That's why Litz and Vienna because they were huge rail centers. Besides Vienna had a lot of oil refineries around it. On that particular mission, we just thought, "Well, hey. This is going to be a good one to go on." We just dropped our bombs and we were bracketed by four 88s. The nose came off the front of the airplane, they wounded the bombardier and the navigator, blew all the windows out. There wasn't a window left in the airplane, blew both of the windows out and the pilot and copilot were both wounded. The waist gunner, one of them, a piece of flack went through his flack helmet and they're not supposed to be able to do that, but it did. It went through and hit him in the temple, and we started down. I want to put something in here -- some very strange things happened. A month or three weeks before this particular mission, this

engineer went up and he said, "I want some small, short pieces of cable and some clamps and nuts, little clamps and nuts." He brought them back to our tent and I said to him, "Elliott, what are you going to do with that?" He said, "Maybe I need them on these first days." It wasn't long, and about the same time, it might have been a little while before that, we went to Innsbruck, Germany, and over there they had flack guns up in the mountains in tunnels so you were 10, 12,000 feet closer than you ordinarily would have been. We were losing a lot of planes. I remember there was a B-24 right under us that crashed on a mountain and right on the mountain peak, part of it went on one side and part of it went on the other, and nobody got out. I was calling these off and the radio went out. My radio went out. When we went on the ground, the pilot came out of his -- and he didn't blow his cart very often -- he came out of the front escape hatch and came back and jerked open the waist door and hollered for Silverman, the waist gunner, err, the radioman. He said "Get out here and hit a brace." He jumped out and saluted, and he said, "If Porter's radio ever goes out again, you're going to be a private in the infantry in the 5th Army." He loved his stripes more than life itself, so from then on, I had two or three throat mics and two or three head sets. This particular time, I happened to have a long-corded one. As we went into a spin, we went into a flat spin, and because we had had part of the cables shot out, so I went up and I jerked the pins out and I could not get that rear door open. It just, the spin, and because somebody didn't want me to get out, I couldn't get out of there. We'd gone down to about 15, 16,000 feet and the copilot called and said, "Is anybody alive back there?" I crawled back to my position and said, "I am." He said, "Well, we've got no control of the airplane with the exception of the autopilot." One of them -- we still don't know whether it was him, the copilot, or the engineer -- flipped that autopilot on and that's what got us out of the spin.

Interviewer: You all were wounded, correct?

Kenneth Porter: Well, the pilot and copilot were both wounded, so I'm assuming it was the engineer. He said, "Well, we have no communication with the waist. Will you crawl up and see what the deal is?" So I crawled up there and told them Pope was badly wounded and was bleeding like a stuck hog. Smity, the one Jewish kid, he was trying to give him first aid. The ball gunner was trying to get out, we finally got him out, but it had skewed his ball turret, some of the flack hits. Anyway, I reported just what had happened and Carl came back and between the two of us, he would put a loop in there and we started the cables up the way they had to go. He would make a loop on one end and we'd put a short piece of cable in there and he'd put a loop in the other end and I would pull it as tight as I could. We repaired the cables in the air. They were sloppy, but I went on a B-17 ride here about six weeks ago and I sat up there and I looked there and I couldn't figure out how we did that, we had to have a lot of help. We had other help besides us. At that time, this is why I like those back pilots, their call signal was "jet black". Of course, we start throwing things out because it had knocked out number one and number four and number two had just three cylinders that would fire so we wouldn't pull anything. We were on engine number three completely. So we started -- we repaired the cables and started throwing everything out to keep our altitude. We even threw everything out but the command radio, all our guns, all our ammunition, anything that would go out -- flack suits, flack helmets, anything that would move to keep us in the air. The pilot had the command radio, and he called for fighter protection, told us what target we'd come off from. They sent in the Tuskegee Airmen to escort us. They sent in about eight of them, and they stayed above us and it's a lot easier to go down on an enemy than it should to come up. The pilot, we couldn't see him because it was partially cloudy, and the pilot called and said, "Where are you guys?" This one fellow came back and said, "We sees you white boys, we sees you." So when we met, by that time, we were part way

across Yugoslavia, just above the mountains. We called again and he says, "What's the matter with you white boys?" He says, "You're drawing flying paint, aren't you?" (Laughter). Anyway, when we went through a pass and we were so close to the mountain that I could see the pine cones in the pine trees, so we just barely made it. We got over into Yugoslavia just above the coast and they said, "We can't stay with you any longer, we've got to leave you." So they had to go down to the Isle of Vis, which was a small island off the Yugoslav coast. They had to go in there to get gasoline, enough to get home. So we called in a sea rescue, in case we had to ditch, but we made it. They directed us into a better field where there was a base, a big base hospital so could take care of the wounded guys. We landed and the right landing gear was shot up real bad and the tail wheel was shot all to pieces. How come I didn't get blown out clear out of that tail, I'll never know. I did get a piece that hit me in the back, but I had a flack suit on and it just shook me up. Anyway, the pilot landed that on the left wheel. When we lost our lift from the wing, why it went down on the right landing gear and then we ground looped and I don't know how many times we ground looped. There was a whole bunch of British Wellingtons to go out on a mission, and you should have seen those Brits jump up and take off, because if it we would have made about one more ground loop, we would have been right in the middle of them. You never saw Brits run so fast. When we finally, we called for ambulances, and they had a fire truck or two and on the way, they had to wait for the ambulances. While we were waiting, I and the other guys counted over 500 holes in that airplane. It was just a flying junk pile. If you don't think we thanked somebody up stairs, you're kidding. That was probably our worst one.

Interviewer: Tell me, we'll go back to some missions here, but I want you to tell me your feelings about the Tuskegee Airmen and General Davis. We'll get to that story about General Davis, too, okay?

Kenneth Porter: You want me to tell you about General Davis?

Interviewer: Well first, about the Tuskegee Airmen.

Kenneth Porter: Tuskegee Airmen, those guys, I had the up most respect for them for his reason. They had to fight two wars. They fought the thing of discrimination so badly, and some of your, well, Lyndon Johnson was one of their main adversaries and Mrs. Roosevelt was the main reason that they got to be escorts. They did a tremendous job. They were wonderful pilots and great, good men that few people appreciate what they actually went through. We had the privilege of being escorted by them. They now, I've had this disputed, but they said after they picked up guys like us, they never lost a bomber. I've had one fighter pilot tell me different than that. General Davis told them, he said, "Failure is not an option. If you get back, that's fine. But if you let one of those bombers get shot down because of your negligence, there's going to be hell to pay." They did the best they could and they were going to disband and General Davis himself, he was a colonel at the time, he came over and he came back from North Africa or Italy, I can't remember which. He came back and testified to the Armed Services Committee of the Senate, and that's the only reason they were able to stay over there. But they did a tremendous job.

Interviewer: Now, you are a person, say his name, full name.

Kenneth Porter: Benjamin O. Davis.

Interviewer: And he was the first what?

Kenneth Porter: He was, well, his father was the first graduate of West Point.

Interviewer: Who was--

Kenneth Porter: I cannot remember his first name.

Interviewer: I mean, he was a what?

Kenneth Porter: Well

Interviewer: We haven't said the word. He was an African American.

Kenneth Porter: He was an African American, yes, but he was the first, and when he was there, all of the time outside of class, he never had one white cadet talk to him. How would you feel under that kind of a condition?

Interviewer: It brings it to a personal story of yours about. Tell us that story.

Kenneth Porter: Well, when I had about 25 sorties done, one of my neighbors was a B-24 pilot and he came over in the 454th Bomb Group. He came to see me and one day, I wasn't flying and so I went in and I got a pass to go see him. I was at Foggia, there at Foggia, and part of town, there all of their streets go off of at big circle. I was standing, I walked up to the sign that said "Cerignola", and on my way to Cerignola -- the 454th and the 455th Bomb Group Liberators were flying out of that field.

Interviewer: I'm sorry, were you hitchhiking?

Kenneth Porter: I was hitchhiking, yes. This Jeep comes across the circle and I saw it was a Colonel, so I saluted. There was a colonel and a captain in there and I saluted them and they stopped. This colonel said, "Sergeant, you look to me like you've got a problem. Can I help you?" I toss this in -- at that time how many white colonels do you think would have stopped for a black staff sergeant? Anyway, why he -- I explained the problem, and he said, "Get in." He told his driver, "You go out so far to the 454th." We got to the guard gate and he just took over, and he asked him where base operations was, and he told him and we went and drove over to

base operation. He went in to find out where Lieutenant Walker was. He came back out and said, "Lieutenant Walker's on a practice mission and they just left. What do you want to do?" I said, if you take me back out to the road, I'll hitchhike back to Foggia and back to where I catch my track." He said, "No, you won't." He told his driver, "You take him back to where he catches his truck to Solone Field." In the meantime, we had a very nice visit. He asked me how many missions I had and everything and I told him. We just had a, he spent between three and four hours, and over 100 miles, trying to help me to find this Lieutenant Walker. I have, ever since, I have so much appreciated them and the first black pilots. I had the opportunity of thanking -- I saluted them and told them how much I appreciated what they did and what a great individual General Davis was

Interviewer: You told me that you talked to one pilot who'd been captured by the Germans?

Kenneth Porter: Yeah, well, that was last September, my wife and I saw an ad that there's going to be some Tuskegee Airmen at Mount Pleasant and I said, "Well, we've got to go see them. We've got to go see it." So, we did. We were on a Friday evening, we went to Mount Pleasant and they came up to Mount Pleasant for a money raising tour for an orphanage in Haiti. They drove up from Phoenix and when we got to Mount Pleasant, she went in the chapel there and I was out in the car and just stand here. Three gentlemen drove up and got out and they were the Tuskegee Airmen and so I went over and I saluted each one of them. He said, two of them said, "What's that for?" I said, "I always wanted to thank some of you gentleman." Come to find out, one is a surgeon in Phoenix, two had over 20,000 hours of commercial pilot time, and you could have not had the privilege of listening to anyone who had more good advice about how lucky they were to give in this great land and succeed than those three gentleman. They talked and then they had the Genesis Group from here in Salt Lake that sang in between the talks that each

one of them gave. Every one of them emphasized how lucky they were to live in America and they could succeed at anything. All they had to do was work.

Interviewer: You said the story about the one being a POW.

Kenneth Porter: Colonel Gaines -- all of them had retired as lieutenant colonels -- Colonel Gaines was the one who was shot down on his 25th mission and spent about seven months in prison camp. When we were talking, he told me, he said, "We were treated better by the Germans than we were our fellow prisoners." which I think is so wrong because they were doing their best to do what they thought they should be doing.

Interviewer: I will turn things to a little different. Tell us about the German jets.

Kenneth Porter: Well, we saw them a lot, whenever we'd go around Bavaria because that's where they were flying out of. They had about 1,300 of them, but they didn't have pilots and the fuel because we had been after oil all the time -- 65 percent of the oil refineries that were destroyed in Germany were done by the guys from the 15th Air Force. That was our biggest, our main targets were oil refineries.

Interviewer: So, what was it like the first time you saw a jet?

Kenneth Porter: Well, you got, uh -- it excited you. They had the 163s and the 262s that ordinarily, if you were flying tight formation, they would come zooming through and you didn't have time to hardly even aim on them because they were, they would come in from the front and here you. We were going about 170 and they were going 500, and the first one we saw, we were flying number 4 position, and they were coming through and just went right over the top of us between us and the number one. There's not that much room, but he went right through us and

the pilot turned to the copilot, "What the hell was that?" You hardly had time to even aim on them.

The one mission that we went up after a big oil refinery up in Ruhland, Germany, and it's about 65 miles southwest of Berlin. They came in all we had dropped our bombs, and they shot down three of our 17s out of the -- it happened just about that fast. A few days after, well, the next day after that, they went on a mission to Berlin and they never should have done it. They vectored, on that particular day, we were at Ruhland, they vectored. They had 300 planes, some of them were jets, but they thought we were going into Berlin and they vectored into Berlin to protect Berlin, but the jets did catch up with us. We were on the way out when they did. There would be numerous times, especially the B-24s. They would go after them because they couldn't fly as close formation and they couldn't fly as high as we could. Numerous times, when we were going up and out of Munich and places like that, why, we'd see the 24s down below us and they were the 8th Air Force, and we'd be going this way and us to the south and they'd be going to the west and they'd take after them and we saw numerous dog fights, or air battles below us. They didn't come up after us because we always tried to fly close formation. Another thing, the B-24s, they took the ball turrets out of them, a lot of them, and they flew the nine man crew instead of ten. This was, to me, stupidity because they thought they could put in a couple more bombs, but it cost a lot of kids their lives because of this stupidity, in my book.

Interviewer: Tell us about your feeling when you see -- I don't want to be morose, but I really like you to express to people today that don't know what it's like to watch another plane go down.

Kenneth Porter: Oh, boy. In the squadron, you made some good friends. We lived in tents, and they lived right next door to you. You got pretty well acquainted. To see some of those guys go

down, it just turned you wrong side out. We had this operations officer, his name was William Robinson, and he had just finished his mission and he was a captain and they had put him in as operations officer and he were very good friends with him. He had a copilot by the name of Lieutenant Bandy, and he sent us on a mission to Vienna. Vienna had so many flack guns, it was unbelievable. They could aim 300 on you any time you were over the city. A good flack gun crew could shoot 20 shells a minute. Anyway, Lieutenant Bandy's crew got shot down, and then, I cannot remember the other. We were flying four, they were flying five, and the other was flying six -- one to the right and one to the left of us. One blew up, and one went down in flames. One was Lieutenant Bandy's crew, and Captain Robinson, he never got over that. He'd send his copilot and his crew and got them all killed. Like I said, it turns you wrong side out to see and then they come back and you come off of a mission and they'd go into their tent and get their stuff. Then a few days later, why, here'd be back another crew in that tent, but you never tried to get very close to them because it, like I said, it just really got to you. I, myself, I never took a flack leave, which was stupid. Then I volunteered to fly with some other crews. I was the first one finished on our crew with my tour. It wasn't good.

Interviewer: You flew how many missions?

Kenneth Porter: Well, I flew 42 sorties, but the 15th Air Force gave me credit for over 50 missions. The 50 mission guys, when they tell you they flew 50 missions, most of them flew around 40 sorties, the ones that I could trace out.

Interviewer: Why were you given the extra credit for those missions?

Kenneth Porter: Well, when you went past the 47th parallel, the 15th Air Force gave you extra credit for it because it was a lot further.

Interviewer: Now, the 8th Air Force gets a lot of attention, and you're 15th Air Force. Tell me how you feel about that.

Kenneth Porter: (Laughter). We always said the 8th Air Force gets the glory and the 15th does the work. That was especially the case with the oil refineries. Our losses were heavier because of that, because they were more heavily defended. Oil refineries around Marsberg and they a lot of them there and up around Ruhland up through there. Why they never took Ruhland out, I never knew, because the 8th should have taken them out and they didn't. We went up and took it out and there were 180 B-17s that went in and took that out. I think we lost three out of our group, but I don't know what the losses were out of the other groups. They flew three missions to Berlin, they shot down 20 B-17s and lost six fighters. That was in March of '45, when the war was supposed to have been won, but the more they pushed in, the more the Germans concentrated their flack guns. It made the targets just tougher than those guys early on who had to fight their way in. There were some groups, the 2nd Bomb Group, which is at Sterparone, they went into them several times and they wiped out whole squadrons, and this is what they would try to do.

Interviewer: Tell me about, I want to hear two things. I don't know which one to ask first, but, I'll try this one. You were on a B-17 ride about six weeks ago?

Kenneth Porter: Yes.

Interviewer: How do you feel when you see that B-17?

Kenneth Porter: Well, anybody that ever flew in a B-17 loves them. They were quite the ladies, those beautiful B-17s. Thanks to my wonderful wife, twice I have been able to -- two years ago, I was able to take two of my son and one of my sons in law, and she footed the bill both times

with her credit card. I was able to take them on rides. The one son, he said, "Dad," he flew in the nose, "that's the most spiritual experience I've ever had in my life, to be up there with you and be able to fly with you in one of those 17s." The son in law, he didn't quit talking about it for a long time. Then, about six weeks ago, there was one that came to Provo. We, again, my wife said, "There's a B-17 around, I'm going to give those kids a ride. I was able to take four of my grandsons on a 17 ride around Salt Lake Valley and up around here and they thought it was really something to get to go with grandpa and ride and see what went on, some of it.

Interviewer: Tell me about coming home to Delta.

Kenneth Porter: Oh, boy. Well, the war was still on and when I finished my tour, I went to Naples. When I got through, I went out and I got a little bottle of dirt and I said, "Before I fly another mission in an airplane, I will eat that bottle of dirt." I had a chance to come home at that time on a C-54 and I refused it. In fact, I had to take the copilot and take him up to Captain Robinson and have him change the order. I went to Naples and stayed there.

Interviewer: Why did you refuse?

Kenneth Porter: What?

Interviewer: Why did you refuse?

Kenneth Porter: I did all the flying I wanted. You can, after so much of that, why, you have all of it you want. Besides that, they were talking a lot of the guys that didn't finish their tour and put them in the B-29s, and I really didn't want another tour.

Interviewer: So take us home to Delta.

Kenneth Porter: Okay, well I waited in Naples for a ship for about three weeks. By that time, the rest of the crew had got finished. We came into Boston, they put us on different trains. Some went north, some went south, some went west. The train that they put us on to go to the west had too many cars and not enough engine. We came across Ohio and through there and the engine would keep running out of steam. So they'd have to stop and build up steam again and we'd get out and exercise. Anyway, then I finally got into Salt Lake City and I called my parents and told them I was coming home. They met me. I rode the, I can't remember whether I rode the train that time or the bus. No, I rode the train to Delta, and they met me. It was, it was tremendous to be able to get back there all in one piece. When I went from Provo, my parents put me on the train to go back and go to Europe. On the way home, my father told my mother, he said, "You'll never see him again." But I fooled him.

Interviewer: All right, now here's a question we like to ask our veterans and I'd especially like to ask you. Tell us about your feelings about our country, about our country and the United States and what this war meant to you.

Kenneth Porter: Well, what my country means to me -- I have the upmost love for it. I work in the American Legion, I'm the leader of the American Legion Post 135. We do everything we can to show people the flag, to teach kids how blessed and how lucky they are to live in America. Most Americans do not realize how blessed they are to live in America. They take all these things for granted. It's such a promised land and there's nothing -- yes, we have problems, but it sure as heck beats the heck out of number two. The, a lot of these Latter day Saint missionaries, I always ask them when they come back from their missions in a foreign country, did you learn an appreciation for America? I've never got a negative answer yet. We just don't realize how blessed we are in this great and wonderful country. We try to have programs in our schools,

essay contests, Bill of Rights coloring contests, and I brought a picture to show you one of the winners in the high school. We go through all of the grades, every grade gets an opportunity. The winners in the high school get to talk on Memorial Day at the cemeteries. When we have our parades, we had one school that blessed my little wife again. She asked the principal one day close to Veteran's Day, would it be all right if Ken came in his legion uniform and the kids were able to talk to him? He says, "No. I want him to come in, bring everything he has, and we will" -- he had two big tables set up and I brought in a lot of stuff. He brought every class out and I talked to every class for 15 minutes. After that, why, every year it just grew and grew and grew and they had guys that brought the National Guard in and they had these Honor Our Veterans assemblies before. On that Veterans Day, we would always go out and raise the flag and tell them about what we did on the military bases and the meaning of all of these things. When you go to a parade in Delta, you very seldom ever see anyone sitting down when that flag goes by. They all stand up. Pardon me. They hold their hand over their hearts and the little kids, while the parades are driving the truck that pulls the American Legion float and we have a firing squad. The little kids, you can hear them say, "Daddy, mama, here come the flags. Stand up!" It really, it really makes a difference. If they would do this and do a lot of these things in the schools, the Pledge of Allegiance -- there's too many schools that don't even bother with saying the Pledge of Allegiance because it might offend someone.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kenneth Porter: This thing of burning the flag, it just makes me boil. Now, last night we had the privilege of doing the proper way of destroying unserviceable flags, and there must have been several hundred people there. We had the legion out of Fillmore, Post 61, and we had the legion

out of Delta, Post 135, and we showed them the proper way to destroy these. Mark Shurtleff was the speaker, another young man, Jacob Nielsen and they did a tremendous job.

Interviewer: I have one more question and then I'm going to, I'm sure they'll have a couple questions. Had you ever seen the ocean or been in an airplane before in World War II?

Kenneth Porter: Never seen the ocean, never been in an airplane.

Interviewer: And you'd never been out of Delta?

Kenneth Porter: Well, yes, I've been out of Delta, I've been--

Interviewer: I mean before that, when you were a kid. Had you ever?

Kenneth Porter: Oh, yeah, but we had airplanes come in there and I was raised during the depression. If you had five bucks, you were wealthy. They'd come in there and my father was the original Scotchman. I shouldn't say that, but he always paid his bills.

Interviewer: What I'm asking is, this must have been an extraordinary experience for a small town Mormon kid who had never seen the ocean and never been in an airplane.

Kenneth Porter: Well, it was different, I'll tell you. There was a lot of words, especially from my boys in Texas. When I went to gunnery school, when I went in, we had about 200 guys from Utah that went in the same deal. There was Trent Parker, Nelton Thaker, Glenn Wright, and the Gerber twins. Those are just some I can think of right off hand. Some were from Granite High, some, like Thaker, they were from East High. There's -- I don't remember. Then there were some from Clearfield, Ted Mahas. If you ever heard of Ted Mahas, you should.

Interviewer: Bud Mahas?

Kenneth Porter: Yeah, Bud Mahas. I haven't seen him for quite awhile. I haven't talked to him on the phone for quite awhile.

Interviewer: We might be interviewing him.

Kenneth Porter: He went in the 8th Air Force and most of them went in the 8th. Anyway, that went to Gunnery School.

Interviewer: So, to sum it all up. What was World War II to you?

Kenneth Porter: Well, it was -- I don't know what your religious persuasion is, but all the tyranny that was in the world had to be gotten rid of. That's what World War II did -- got rid of so much of the t they tyranny. Haven't done enough to keep all of that tyranny out. I feel very sorry for these kids going out to Iraq and Afghanistan. They don't know who their enemy is. At least we had an idea of who the enemy was.

Crew Member: We've asked this of other guys, and you will look at Jeff when you answer this.

Interviewer: Yes, because I'm so handsome.

Crew Member: Describe what it feels like as a tail gunner -- the sound, the sight.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Crew Member: The sight when flack comes up.

Interviewer: Yeah you have a mask on and it's cold and what is the smell?

Crew Member: That flack is black, as we've heard this over and over. I just, I really want to hear--

Interviewer: What's it sound like, flack and what's it doing to your body and--

Crew Member: What are you thinking?

Interviewer: When it misses, tell us about your fear.

Kenneth Porter: It just, you don't pee your pants, but you just about do. It scares the dickens out of you. I could just about get, when that stuff would start coming up, I could feel myself getting littler and littler and littler and trying to get more down in that flack helmet because there it is.

Well, I'll tell ya -- I remember this one waist gunner that got hit in the temple? This one day, the Germans, they had what they call a gun named radar. They had four 88s on a radar set, and that would come up "bang, bang, bang, bang." It might come on this side of you or that side of you or right up this way. This one particular time, I was watching and it came "bang, bang, bang" and the last one was right there. If you can see the red in it, you can see the fire, you know you're going to get hit. This one came right up there and I said, "That one's close." This waist gunner turned about and he said, "Oh, Porter, that wasn't close." The day that he got hit, the next day, I went in to see him at the hospital and the first words I asked him when they woke him up, "Well, dammit, Pope, was that close enough?" He never said a word about flack after that to me. (Laughter) It just scares the dickens out of you.

Interviewer: How thick does it get like around Vienna?

Kenneth Porter: Well, they just put up a great, big cloud. It just looked like you were going into a cloud.

Interviewer: Could you hear them?

Kenneth Porter: Oh, you betcha, you could hear them. When they get close enough, you can hear them. If you can hear them or you can see the flacks, you know you're going to get hit. It sounds just like someone throwing gravel up against the side of the car when it hits the airplane.

Crew Member: Does it pop, does it explode? Can you hear an explosion?

Kenneth Porter: Oh, yes. You can just hear a big ol' explosion with a big bang, and all of a sudden, all of these little pieces come flying at you. It scares you. I don't care who you are, your head, I don't care who you are. You fly so many missions, it would get between this ear and that ear and it would change you dramatically. When I got through with my tour, my hands shook just like this. A lot of guys could not take a full tour. They'd go out and they'd say, "Hey, I cannot do this anymore. I'm done. I refuse to do anymore." I had one mission, this mission to Berlin with another crew. A lot of guys would get drunk in order to be able to take more missions, they'd get drunk and a lot of guys lost their lives because of this, especially fighter pilots. There was a lot of them that went a little bit boozed up and they didn't come out so good with it. You take so much and it will get with you to the point where you cannot -- for example, I didn't, after every mission, they give you two ounces of whiskey if you wanted it. I saved mine and gave it to the ground crew chief of this plane that we had shot up so bad. Anyway, he thought I was a pretty nice guy. I should have drunk part of it myself, because when I got home, I got so I couldn't sleep. The only way I could sleep was to go out and get drunk and then I could keep for awhile. Bless my mother, I don't know whether she knew it or not, but I had a heck of a time with it. A lot of guys, like I say, they turned out to be alcoholics. I had this one fellow, I named him in the group, I just named to you, he died an alcoholic. He was out of the group that I was with, we figured he was the most religious one of the whole bunch, but they ditched in the English Channel. He lived here in Salt Lake and a couple of them I knew and both

of them died alcoholics. This one, these two guys, one of them ended up being an LDS Stake President, and the other ended up being an alcoholic. So you learn to be pretty careful of how judgmental you are of some of these guys that's been in the military because it's tough on your brain, and they're finding this out in a lot of kids that's coming back from Iraq because your under that strain all of the time. When we were flying, they'd get us up at 2:00 the night before and they would post the battle order is what they called it. That meant you were flying, if you were physically capable, you flew. They woke you up at 2:00, you'd go and get something to eat and you didn't dare eat very much because there were no rest rooms in those airplanes. I can remember once, we had not too long after we had the deal with the night flying, we went on a mission and this one young man had to go. They always took extra ammunition with us in the waist, and they happened to have this extra ammunition box because he was getting diarrhea. Anyway, we just about got to the target and he had to strip off and it about froze him to death. Just about that time a flack gun out of nowhere, here came this thing and came in and took part of his ammunition box with it. So there was -- you didn't dare drink very much because you just, there were just no restrooms. It wasn't like all these modern airplanes where you have just colder than blue blazes and you get up there and take all your clothes off at 40 below.

Interviewer: Or any part of you.

Kenneth Porter: You're cold.

Crew Member: Can I ask a question? So you're sitting there as a tail gunner and you got in these long missions for nine hours. What are you thinking, what are your thoughts? I understand you're LDS. Did you say prayers? How did these guys, the Jewish, Protestant, Catholic -- did they all say their little prayers up there or did you talk about it?

Kenneth Porter: We didn't, as far as religion, we didn't really discuss a lot because you want cohesiveness, and politics and religion, we didn't go there very much. I had one of the fellow, I was always little brother. He was 90 years old and just as close as we are, there're no brothers that are closer than we are. I was always little brother, and he was big brother, and he read my Book of Mormon, but that was as far as it went. Anyway, I don't care who it was. There're a lot of crews that have prayer together before they got in the airplane. There was some that would study the Bible a lot together, but I was lucky. I was back there sitting on my knees all the time, so it was very easy for me to pray and I did a lot of it. I know, and one of the copilots was a Baptist, and I talked to him here about three weeks ago. One of the things he brought up, he says, "Someone was flying with us besides us." There was some of those missions, that one I told you about and there was several others, but there's no way we should have got back from those missions. Another example I'll give you -- we flew this one plane and I told you we wouldn't fly it anymore because when we got back from this one mission, the pilot said, "We're out of gas. Before you come in to land, the guys that have wounded people on board, they came in first and you flew around. The guy says, "I can't." Before we got to the end of the runway, we didn't have any engines. All four engines had quit and they had to tow us off the end of the runway. That's why we gave up night flying. There was another thing I've got to tell you. We had a Catholic chaplain, Father Rice was his name, and he died here about two years ago. Every mission we flew, Father Rice, be it rain, shine, anything, Father Rice was about half way up the runway blessing every plane as it took off. I don't care what religion you were, you appreciated that because you were, you knew that you needed all the help that you could get. There were just a lot of great men sacrificed their lives willingly, that we might have all the great things we have in this country and all of the 77th division cemetery in which Neal Maxwell was in. They had

the following thing. It says, "We gave our todays, that you might have your tomorrows." That's what World War II did. We've had a lot of years of great, great things that too many people just take for granted that were paid for with sacrifice of many young, great men. Out of my class, we lost our student body president and our vice president. One was killed on Iwo Jima, the other was killed on Okinawa. The one was a Marine, he volunteered two or three weeks before I did. You had to be all volunteer at 17, and that's what we did. Six of us did and one got killed out of the six. A couple of them, they went down and such is life.

Interviewer: Elizabeth, do you have any?

Elizabeth: Yeah, I wanted to know, I think I know the answer to this, when we got home, did he talk about the war to friends and family?

Interviewer: Yeah, after the war, did you talk about it a little?

Kenneth Porter: Well, yes. I am not ashamed of the fact that we got our tail feathers shot off a lot of times. Everyone in the combat had a lot of the same kind of experiences. This is one of the privileges I have had. My brother was a history teacher in the high school and one of my nephews was. They had me come into the high school every year, sometimes a week at a time and talk about World War II. I still do this. In fact, the history teacher, I saw him yesterday morning while I was trying to find those pictures, I thought I might have left them at the high school. But I had that opportunity of going in and telling them some of my experiences and also, I tried to put in there, "Stay away from drugs. Stay away from all these things. Study hard. Take advantage of all your opportunities while you're in school. Mind your parents. Do the things that you should be doing to succeed in this life." They'll listen to you.

Interviewer: Did it help, when you came home, it's hard after all that to adjust. To come from, it sounds like you loved Delta. It sounds like you loved that town.

Kenneth Porter: Well, it's a good place.

Interviewer: And so then, did it help to have that kind of community?

Kenneth Porter: Did it what?

Interviewer: Did it help to have that kind of community, to come home to?

Kenneth Porter: Of course it did. I had guys like Uncle Ray and then some of my friends, there wasn't very many that got in the combat situation out of my class. But there was one of her, another of her uncles was my age. It helped a lot. Of course, we'd, like I said, we'd, in order to help a little bit, we would go out drinking. That helped, too. They you get some of these ladies, like my wife, who you try to not do anything to destroy their idea of you.

Crew Member: Can I ask you--

Interviewer: Go ahead.

Crew Member: As a young boy, and you're so young, they're drinking and whatever. Did you drink, Kenneth, because you were still nervous from your experiences as a tail gunner, or did you drink because -- did you know why you were doing that? Was it a fun recreational, whatever a young man does, or were you trying to--

Interviewer: Did you learn to drink in the military?

Crew Member: --anesthetize something?

Interviewer: I'd tried it while I was still in high school, very little, but I did. When I got home, I couldn't sleep. That was the only way I could sleep. They you get to liking it. It's easy for you to get liking it and you just do it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Elizabeth: I'm good.

Interviewer: I'm all done. This has been a wonderful interview. We may call you back.

End of recording.