

Interview of Robert Hemingway

Interviewer: Well, we have with us in the studio today Robert Hemingway and we're awfully honored to have you here with us today, Robert.

Robert Hemingway: Thank you.

Interviewer: We appreciate, I know it's been a little effort to get here, and we really appreciate you and your lovely wife coming up and spending an hour or so with us today.

Elizabeth: And can you hold on just a second? I'm going to get Natalie in here.

Interviewer: Okay. So, we're going to begin by asking you where you were on December 7th, 1941, and what went through your mind.

Robert Hemingway: Well, I was born in Salt Lake, but I lived all my life till I went in the service in Bakersfield, California. My family moved there when I was about four years old. I graduated from high school in 1941, and in December I was working for a furniture outfit. It was Sunday morning, and they were rearranging some furniture in the basement of their place, and so that's where I was Sunday morning when I heard on the radio of Pearl Harbor. Of course, that meant, here I am, 18 years old, and I knew that I would eventually have to go in the service or something. It's just a matter of sitting around waiting to get drafted or do something else. I had an uncle who was in the service and he told me I ought to try and get into something that I wanted to do. So, I saw glamorous pictures about pilots in the Air Corps, you know, and I figured if I could get into a program like that, I could earn more money. I could get better training. I could get some educational benefits and so forth. The only problem was, in order to get in that program, you either had to have two years of college, or you had to pass a test that

lasted for eight hours. Well, I went out to Miner Field, which was about 12 miles from where I lived and took the test and passed it. Low and behold, I passed it. So that was in May of 1942 that I took the test. From then till November, I was just sitting around waiting to get called up because the country had to provide all the training for all these things and they had to build facilities. In May or November, I caught the train and went down to Santa Ana, California and began what then was pre-flight. I never went to basic like most people. I was never a private, I was never a sergeant. I was an aviation cadet. It was a tough nut for me because I was the youngest guy in the outfit, but I was successful. Finished pre-flight, you want me to tell you where I went from there or what?

Interviewer: Yeah, as much as -- you were 18?

Robert Hemingway: 18.

Interviewer: Yeah, just continue on and give us a story.

Robert Hemingway: Okay, after I had left Santa Ana, I went to Hemet, California, the Ryan Flight Academy. It was a private airfield run by the Ryan Aircraft Company. I got on the first airplane I'd ever been in in my life. After 10 hours -- oh, by the way, when I first got in that airplane and the instructor took it off and climbed up, and when he leveled that airplane to level it out, I thought the whole world had dropped out from under me. At any rate, after 10 hours I soloed and I got through that program okay. Then I went to Lancaster, California to the Polaris Flight Academy and flew BT-13s and went to that program. We did a little night flying and all kinds of maneuvers and cross-countries and everything. Then, at the end of basic, everybody who had successfully completed the program was assigned. You either went to twin engine, or you went to pursuit, single engine. Well I was sent to Yuma, Arizona to twin engine school in a

place called Fly Field, which is now a Marine Corps base, but then it was a lot different. I flew the AT-17. It was called a bamboo bomber because it was made out of wood and had cloth covering. Anyhow, it was a twin engine and I finished that program, graduated as a second lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps. I got my wings as a pilot on October the 1st, 1943. Then after 10 day leave, I was sent to Roswell, New Mexico for a B-17 transition.

Interviewer: Had you turned 19 yet?

Robert Hemingway: I turned 19 in August, and I got my wings in October. So I was 20 years old. You know, in that day, you couldn't even get in the program if you were 28, because if you were 28, they figured you had enough sense not to get into the program. Anyhow, I did. I went through B-17 transition, spent the winter in Salt Lake because when we finished there, they sent us to Salt Lake City and we were quartered in the exhibition building at the fairgrounds. Again, you know, they had a little backlog and they just had to have someplace to put us till they were ready for us. I was there till December in '44 -- '43, until about the 1st of February. Then around the 1st of February, I was sent first to Grand Island, Nebraska, and in Grand Island, Nebraska, it was a base where they modified brand new B-17s for combat. They fly them in there from the factory. They'd work on them and put the radios and whatever they needed in them, but before they'd leave there, they had to have 10 hours of flying time. My job, then, was to just fly them around. We had four or five of us there, plus there were a number of guys there who had finished flying combat and came home, which was a rare individual in those days. At any rate, they flew and we flew, and we just flew around. Those guys taught me how to fly formation because they knew how to fly formation. I can recall one day, I was flying off the left wing of this other plane, and when you fly formation, you don't see anything. You've got your hands on the throttle, and fists on the wheel and feet on the rudders and you just watch the other

airplane because you are only a few feet from him, and you have to be very careful. I glanced out and we were going down the runway of an old abandoned air field, about 10 feet off the ground, but I didn't have any idea where I was because I was flying formation. Anyhow, after I had been there for two or three months, I was sent to Sioux City, Iowa. While I was in Sioux City, a number of things happened to me. My father died and I had a leave to go home and bury him and when I got back, they assigned a crew to me and I picked up my crew. There was a crew of 10 people on there -- my copilot, and bombardier, and navigator, and my gunners, and a radio operator, and a flight engineer, and all these guys were older than I was. As a matter of fact, my tail gunner was an old guy who was 41 years old, and at that time, I was 20 years old. Anyhow, we went through all that, we practiced bombing and we practiced all kinds of things. Then when we finished in Sioux City, we caught a train, went to Huntington, Kansas, picked up all of our overseas equipment, back on the train to Camp Killmore, New Jersey, and got in a convoy overseas, we spent 14 days on that old ship. It was an old tub, really. It was "Her Majesty's Ship, the Highland Brigade," and it was a ship that the British had used to ship beef from Argentina. The hull was all refrigerated, but because I was an officer, I was in a cabin up on top side, but the cabin was about eight feet wide and 10 feet long and there were bunks on both sides and I had the top bunk on one side. We spent 14 days there and pulled into the Liverpool River in Liverpool, England. It was a fascinating thing, really, because the river, and the tide there is 40 feet up and down. So the ship went into a dock and they closed the gates behind it and the tide went out. You look over the edge, and there's the river 40 feet down. It was interesting because the dock next to where we were had been bombed -- it was gone. We were just there long enough to get off, and then I went to another base in England for a week for some more overseas indoctrination. Then I went to the base that I flew combat with, the 34th

Bomb Group in a place called Mendlesham, England, which is 14 miles in from Ipswich on the Ipswich-Norge Highway. The outfit I went to was originally a B-24 base, but they had suffered a lot of losses of B-24s and they were not flying. They were converting from B-24s to B-17s. We -- myself and five other crews of us -- were the first people to fly B-17s, the first crews to come in there. So we flew a few practice missions with them and gave those guys an opportunity to get familiar with a B-17.

Then on the 17th of September, 1944, I flew my first combat mission. I had turned 21 on the 30th of August, about three weeks ahead of time, so we flew the first combat mission. It so happened, because of the war, I wasn't in the formation, I was the first ship to land after that mission. Because we had transferred from B-24s to B-17s, there were a lot of dignitaries around there. They wanted to know how everything went and I was the first ship to land, so they all came up and talked to me and so forth. My crew chief said, "Lieutenant, you're lucky. You only got two holes in your airplane today." Well, two holes that day, but before, three or four days later, I knew there was a war on because I had lots of holes. I had a piece of flack -- by the way, you know what flack is? This is what flack is. This piece hit me in the stomach, not on that mission, but on my 13th mission.

Interviewer: That's amazing. Do you want to see it?

Robert Hemingway: We went to a place called (inaudible).

Interviewer: Let me ask you one question. At that time, were the fighters going all the way with you on your missions?

Robert Hemingway: Yes.

Interviewer: So that was later on in the war then.

Robert Hemingway: Yes, and the German fighters were pretty well neutralized. I don't recall ever having much trouble with German fighters because P-51s and P-47s went with us. In the early part, when I first started flying, they weren't with us very much, but towards the end of the year, they were with us all the time. They went with us to Berlin. I saw the biggest dog fight I ever saw in my life over Berlin one day. Germans and P-51s. The P-51s were wonderful. I love them because one of them escorted me home one time after I really got shot up.

Interviewer: Okay, you were right in the middle of telling us about this one mission when I interrupted you.

Crew: Four days later.

Interviewer: Four days later after your first mission.

Robert Hemingway: We got a lot of, a lot of holes in the plane. Jesse sat in the tail. A piece of flack came in behind him, hit the girders, that was a support beam for the tail, cut that half in two, bounced over and knocked out his intercom, went on around -- it went all the way around him and never hit him. Bless his little heart, he didn't get hit. Anyhow, on my 13th mission, I really got shot up. The B-17 had, as you know, four engines, and each engine had 37 gallons of oil. In the leading edge of the wing is a radiator that the oil cycled through to cool it. Well, I got a hit in that radiator on the number 3 engine, and the first thing I knew anything was wrong is my ball turret gunner called me up and said, "Lieutenant, oil's coming out of that engine." When I heard that, I reached over and tried to feather the engine, but you feather the engine with oil pressure, but I didn't have any oil pressure, so the engine wouldn't feather. So, here is that engine just spinning out there and no engine, no oil in the engine and the engine froze up. The

shaft on the prop broke and it just sat out there and spun. Well, when that happened, of course, I lost a lot of altitude. The plane vibrated terribly, but I reached over and pulled the throttle back and dropped down from about roughly 25,000 feet to about 10 or 12,000 feet. My crew all lined up at the back door waiting for me to tell them to bail out, but I told them, "Don't you dare bail out till I tell you to." Anyhow, when I slowed the plane down to about 132 miles an hour, the vibration quit. So, I just came home at about 132 miles. The squadron had already gone. It was just normal processing if you got shot up or got shot down or anything, the bulk of the outfit had to go home, you know, but a P-51 came and escorted me. I can still see that P-51 sitting on my left wing. It had a mule on it and it was called the "Arkansas Traveler." He'd fly out there and he'd go around and fly up here and he'd fly over me, escorting me home. Well, we tooled home then slow. By the way, a B-17 will stall out at about 120, so I was not very much above stalling speed. We flew all the way back to England. When we got back over to England, we got in a rain storm and we were letting down because we wanted to go to the base and I was on the radio calling up for what to call a "QDF", which is a heading to fly to go home. They gave me the heading and my copilot was flying. He got going too fast and the plane started shaking again. Well I reached over and pulled the throttles back and pulled the stick up and that prop that had been spinning out there all that time flew off, cut a big hole in the side of the airplane, and the last I saw it, it kind of went out on the wing there and then dropped. I've often thought, it was a Sunday afternoon, and I've often thought, "I wonder if that thing ended up on some Englishman's dinner table or someplace." I have no idea where it went. But anyhow--

Interviewer: Let me ask you, on this mission, you'd already gone and dropped your bombs and were returning home.

Robert Hemingway: Right.

Interviewer: After the engine went out, how long did it take you to get home after that? And that P-51 stayed with you the whole time?

Robert Hemingway: Till we got over England.

Interviewer: Till you got over England.

Robert Hemingway: I don't know. I was about an hour and a half behind the squadron getting home. As a matter of fact, they had already figured we were dead. They figured we went all the way down. My bombardier was a good Catholic boy, and so the priest had already said a rosary for us, and they figured we were dead, but we got back. Well, that's just one experience. I flew 35 missions. I think, two times, I came home without holes in my airplane. Everything from the two I got the first mission to dozens of holes. As a matter of fact, that day I had all this trouble, that plane was just full of holes because that prop had spun out there and the nose cone on the radio engine is cast. Well, that prop chewed up all that cast, it chewed off all the covering, it chewed the fins off the cylinders -- all that stuff, it acted like flack, like shells, like shrapnel, and it just peppered the airplane. By the way, it was interesting because that day I was supposed to fly "Littling the Lemon," which is my normal airplane, but she wouldn't start. The engine wouldn't start, so they assigned me another airplane, and that's the plane that got all shot up. It was interesting because they put that plane back together, and about two weeks, somebody else was flying it and they got shot down.

Interviewer: And it killed the whole crew, huh?

Robert Hemingway: Yeah. My plane, Lilly, I flew it for 14 missions. One day, I happened to be off base and when I came back, there was a plane in the ditch at the end of the runway. I found out somebody else had been flying my plane, over shot the runway, totaled it out in the ditch. So

I just flew whatever plane they assigned me. We had all kinds of experiences. Every couple of weeks, we would get two days off. I used to go to London, ride the "tube", look around, go to a movie. One of our interesting missions was Christmas Eve. We, you know that Battle of the Bulge was in December that year, and we could not fly during the Battle of the Bulge because the weather was too bad. As soon as the weather broke, then we went and assisted them in the Battle of the Bulge. On Christmas Eve, I flew a mission to Frankfurt, and when we came back, I happened to have a gun camera. When you had a gun camera, it took pictures as soon as you dropped the bomb so that they'd find out where they hit them and whether or not they destroyed the target. When you had a strike camera, you could leave the formation as soon as you got over the English Channel and come home quick so they could get the pictures. Well, when I got back to the base, there were all kinds of planes flying around our base and landing. Another fellow who had a gun camera also come back early. He called up and asked for landing instructions, and they said, "You can't land. You've got to circle the base because these other people are landing." I didn't call in. I just got in the pattern, landed, sat down there in my hard stand, and watched the other guys. What had happened is that the weather had closed in on England and these other bases couldn't land at their own base, so they were trying to land on our base, and they did. Our base had runways in a triangle like that. Well, out of the three runways, two of them were off because they had crash landings on them. I sat there and watched the guys in our outfit come home and it was dark and they had their lights all on and looked like a big Christmas tree in the sky, and they were trying to land and they were really having problems because they tried to land, and they'd tell them, "You've got to go around, somebody's in the way. You can't land." "I can't go around, I haven't got any gas." All those kind of things -- Christmas Eve was an interesting night.

Interviewer: Could you hear all the interaction over your radio?

Robert Hemingway: Well, if you ever saw Memphis Belle, all that garbage they were talking about, that's a lot of baloney because it was radio silence. You couldn't talk to any other airplanes. You didn't talk to the other members of the crew except every minute you had to call all members of the crew to make sure they were still alive because, you see, we were so high up that you had to have oxygen masks on. If something happened to your oxygen, in about a minute, you'd pass out. So every minute, we'd call, but we didn't talk other than that. The only time I ever called anybody was to call for fighter escort when I had trouble.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. Take us through a typical day of a mission.

Robert Hemingway: Well, we lived in Quonset huts. You know what a Quonset hut is? It's about 40 feet long. When we had to fly a mission, the CQ, who was in charge of quarters, would come and wake me up and say, "Lieutenant Hemingway, it's such and such a time and briefing is at such and such a time -- about an hour."

Interviewer: Usually, what time of the morning was that?

Robert Hemingway: Well, it depended. Usually was around 2:30.

Interviewer: AM?

Robert Hemingway: AM, but it depended on where we were going, how long the mission was, whether it would be that or later. Then we'd go and we had to get up and get our clothes on, go down to the mess hall and have breakfast, then go from mess hall to a briefing. In the room where the briefing was, there was a huge map on the end of the building and it was covered. When they would come in and start the briefing, they would pull that out and there's the lines

telling you where they're going. They would give you information sheet telling what the code numbers were for the day, where you were to fly in the formation, where you were going to go, what time take off was, what time you would rally and head out. Then, I and my other two officers, three officers -- my copilot, navigator, and bombardier -- all went to that briefing, and the rest of the guys would go on out to the plane. We'd pick up our, by that time, we already had our flight suits on and so forth. Then we would go out to the plane, check the plane out, and get ready to go. When it came time to take off -- let's see, I've got a picture here. That's the wrong one, of what we looked like. That's what I looked like.

Interviewer: Just a young kid.

Robert Hemingway: Yeah, I was 21 years old.

Interviewer: With dimples (laughter).

Robert Hemingway: See, that's basically what we looked like.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Robert Hemingway: We had these heated flying suits on, carried our parachute, there's my crew. This is in Sioux City, and this is what we looked like when we were flying.

Interviewer: Even though you changed planes, you had the same crew all the time?

Robert Hemingway: I had the same crew all the time.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Hemingway: The only time I ever flew with another crew -- I flew with a young fellow that had just come over there. He was a pilot. He had his own crew, but on his first combat

mission, he flew with me as my copilot. He turned out to be a guy from Salt Lake, a kid by the name of Bob Knowlton. He ended up being a lawyer. He lives down in St. George now.

Anyhow, other than that, I flew with the same guys. This is a little book that I kept track of every mission that I flew. When I came back, I sat down and wrote up what happened on those missions.

Interviewer: That's a really valuable--

Robert Hemingway: Yeah, I don't want to lose that.

Interviewer: --piece right there. Well, did you have any other close calls in any of those, or any other interesting things you want to mention about your other missions? Did you have, you had fighter escort, did you have ever in 1944 any German fighters come after you and attack you?

Robert Hemingway: Once or twice. Well, for instance, my tail gunner one time called me up and said, "There's a plane coming up close by." I said, "Keep an eye on him, Jesse. If he gets close enough, fire a few rounds at him." Well, he got close, so Jesse was worried, so he fired. When we fired, we had twin .50 caliber machine guns, and every third round was a tracer. So when he fired this, that fellow knew he was being shot at. So when he knew he was being shot at, he took off. We didn't have much in the way of fighter problems. The P-51s and the P-47s escorted us, and they'd go clear to Berlin with us and back.

Interviewer: That's amazing.

Robert Hemingway: That P-51 was some airplane because, when it was full of gas and full of ammunition, and it had wing tanks, and those things had a hard time getting off the ground, but once they were in the air, they were okay. They would maintain, they'd burn the fuel out of the

wing tanks, and if they ever had any trouble with enemy fighters, they'd drop the wing tank and they'd eventually drop them on the way anyhow. That was basically it. This is an interesting article I think is pretty descriptive. It says, "World War II combat took the lives of more US bomber crew members than the whole Marine Corps in the war. Being one of the bomber boys was the second most dangerous assignment given to American service members during the war. It was exceeded only by the submarine crews in the Pacific." It says that the Army Air Corps lost some 10,000 four-engine bombers. Each was typically manned by a crew of nine. Never before had warriors fought at 25,000 feet. That's a pretty interesting little summary. After I finished flying combat, and flew my 35th mission, my squadron commander wanted me to stay on and be a squadron instructor. I thought, "That's a good deal, I'll get promoted and I won't have to fly very much." He said, "Take a few days off and when you come back, I'll have orders for you to be the squadron instructor." So I went to London for a couple days, and when I came back, he had orders, but it wasn't to be the squadron instructor. I was sent to France to a place called B53, which was a sub depot where their main job, they had ground crews that went out and fixed airplanes that had been forced down on the continent. They had crews there. I was there with my copilot, my navigator, and my flight engineer. The other guys went home. There were guys there that flew P-51s and flew P-47s and four or five of us crews were B-17s. Well, when they had a plane go down, they'd send a ground crew out and they'd work on the plane till they figured it would fly and then they'd notify us and we'd go get it and pick it up and fly it back. First, we'd fly it back to our base, and then they'd check it out there, make sure it went across the channel and then they'd have another crew that would take it to England. Well, one day, we didn't have much to do. We went to operations office and there was a plane that had been there on the top of the list for a long time. I said, "What's the matter with that plane?"

They said, "It's not parked in an airport, it's parked in a parking lot, and nobody wants to go get it." I said to my guys, "Should we go get it?" They said, "Well, lieutenant, if you go get it, we'll go with you." So, they flew us out there in a little C-64, and landed and that plane was there, all right. It was a beautiful old B-17. I mean, it was really colorful. It had bombs from a whole string of missions it had flown and you know how the B-17 had that chin turret? Well, you know what a P-40 was like. They had it painted like -- they had it painted like that on that B-17. It was really a classy looking old John, and it had been there a long time.

Interviewer: What city was it in?

Robert Hemingway: It was outside of (inaudible), out in the country. Well, this parking lot was now being used as a replacement for field artillery pieces -- *big* guns, and they were all over this field. Well, the guy that was in charge of it was a British major and I went and talked to him and I said, "They sent us out here to take this airplane. Will you please move those out so we can take off in between them." He said, "Well, you come back in the morning and I'll have them all moved," and he did. When I came back in the morning, there were hundreds of people around there. They were all the people from that little Belgian city and farms around there. I was coming to take away their symbol of liberation, you know, that plane had become really something to them. Well, the ground crew was there. They had the engines running. I taxied the plane around, lined it up -- and this, by the way, was not supposed to be enough room to take a B-17 off of. Anyhow, I gave it everything it had and took off down the parking lot. When I came down to the end of the asphalt, I dropped down a few degrees of flaps and it jumped up in the air a few feet and I sucked the wheels up and went out across that plowed field till I got enough speed to get it up in the air. It was a good flying old airplane, really was. Some airplanes are just like cars -- some of them are nice and some of them are kind of raunchy, but

anyhow, this was a good old plane. So I went back to the base and when I got ready to land, only one wheel would come down. So, I called them, I said, "What you want to do?" This smart aleck in the tower said, "Oh, just pick out a soft spot and belly it in." I said, "Are you sure that's what you want to do?" He said, "No, you better wait a minute." So he got the base commander out there and all this time, we're tooling around. He said, "How much gas have you got?" I said, "If these gauges are right, I have quite a bit of gas." He said, "Do you think you have enough to fly it to England?" "Oh, yeah, I think so." So he said, "Fly it over to our base in England because they have better facilities to fix it." So I took off. But standard operating procedures were, if you knew you were going to crash, throw out everything that might come loose. Throw out all the radios, throw out all the guns, the first thing you throw out is the ball turret, because if you crash land, that ball turret will buckle the fuselage and total the airplane out. So we threw the ball turret in the England Channel. Then we threw all those guns and all that other stuff out, and we got -- by the way, the compasses were all out of whack. So, we just had to fly by pilot and look to see where you were going. We finally got back to the base, and they called me up on the radio and they said, "It doesn't look like that other wheel is down. You better buzz the tower and let us check it out." So I buzzed the tower and they finally come to the conclusion, they thought it was okay. So they said, "Don't land on the run way. Land on the grass beside it." So, I did, and as soon as -- it was the left wheel that wouldn't go down -- as soon as I touched down on the right wheel, I put on the breaks and it started to ground, and as soon as it lost lift, that wing fell down and I ended up sliding along the grass. It was really kind of a smooth landing. It was nice. So I opened my window, jumped out on the wing and took off.

Interviewer: Who did you have with you?

Robert Hemingway: I had my copilot, my navigator, and my engineer.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Look, I want to go back to your missions over Berlin. How many times did you go and bomb Berlin?

Robert Hemingway: Three times.

Interviewer: Okay, you were starting to tell us about the dog fights or something that were there?

Robert Hemingway: Well, where we went into Berlin, we went in, dropped our bombs, turned around and took off. In that area in the middle there was just a huge dog fight -- P-51s and German fighters and P-47s, and they were just going at it and it was an interesting experience, you know.

Interviewer: How accurate was your bombing? Were you still bombing factories in those days, if you could?

Robert Hemingway: We bombed -- you know, in the early part of the war, it was kind of dumb the way they did it. They didn't bomb things they ought to bomb. Finally, they turned it over to the Air Force and they said, "You bomb what you think will stop the war." So, we bombed railroad marshaling yards, stopped their transportation, we bombed all kinds of synthetic oil refineries and other oil producing things which cut off their fuel, and we bombed ball bearing works, we bombed anything like that. We were fairly accurate. You know, we had to stay in pretty close formation because the lead ship bombed and when the lead ship bombed, everybody else bombed. If you were scattered out, your bombs were scattered out. But you stayed close together and they all fall into pattern.

Interviewer: Tell us about your last mission.

Robert Hemingway: I don't remember where I went.

Interviewer: That would be your 35th mission.

Robert Hemingway: Yeah.

Interviewer: You don't have to show us.

Robert Hemingway: Well, anyhow, it was interesting because I was flying a brand new airplane. Brand new, you know, that was pretty great because most of those old clunkers we'd been flying had been around a long time. When I finished flying or dropped the bombs, because it was my last mission, I was able to leave the full mission and come on home, and I did. So I buzzed the switch and then went on back to the base.

Interviewer: Was it the last mission for your crew as well?

Robert Hemingway: All of us, yep. This was 34 and 35, and it was in the Roer Valley. We went through some of the old quarters, bombed out, and went out the same old quarters. There was a pretty good bit of flack, but we didn't get hit very bad. On the way back, we flew the whole bomb run on instruments, left the formation early and came home and made a fairly low pass over the field, then we got our pictures taken because it was all over.

Interviewer: That must have been a pretty exciting thing to know that you had survived.

Robert Hemingway: Oh, man, I'll tell you. You have to realize that if you made 14 missions, you'd run your luck out -- that was the average -- and we made *all* those missions.

Interviewer: Where were you when you heard the war was over?

Robert Hemingway: I was in Marville, France. I had picked up a B-17 from Antwerp that morning and we were still there in Marville. Marville is just a little village, you know, but they

had parades all up and down the street. Everybody was out in the streets yelling and screaming you know because the war was over. It was interesting, and after that, I went back to France. Flew us back to France, and I flew home on a passenger in a C-46. First went to Wales; Iceland; Greenland; Goose Bay, Labrador; Prescott, Maine; and then got a troop train and went back to California.

Interviewer: So you landed, where did you land? In New York?

Robert Hemingway: No, Prescott, Maine.

Interviewer: Prescott, Maine and then took a troop train.

Robert Hemingway: Troop train all the way across the country.

Interviewer: I'll be darn.

Robert Hemingway: And then to Camp Beale up north of Sacramento, then I caught a bus and went back to Bakersfield where I started from.

Interviewer: On that troop train, where there citizens lined up at the stations?

Robert Hemingway: Yeah, they'd give you something to eat

Interviewer: Through the windows and things?

Robert Hemingway: Through the window. It was in the summer. It was hotter than the devil.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Hemingway: It was about the 26th of July.

Interviewer: And Japan had not yet surrendered when--

Robert Hemingway: Yeah, Japan, we were through in August.

Interviewer: Elizabeth, have you got any?

Elizabeth: I'm supposed to ask about the plane in France?

Unknown Person: About the persons living in it.

Elizabeth: Somebody living in a plane in France?

Robert Hemingway: Oh, yeah.

Crew: I think that's so funny.

Robert Hemingway: When a plane was down, like this one that I picked up that day, they always sent an MP to stay out with the plane and protect it. Well, this guy had been out there a long time. He had cut a hole in the Plexiglass window in the back and he stuck a stove pipe out. He had a stove in the plane, he had some Belgian girl living with him. All these people around there, you know -- when I got ready to take that thing off, you'd think I was stealing their livelihood or something because this was their plane, this symbol of liberation. I was taking their plane away from them.

Interviewer: That would have to be a pretty dangerous job, I think, because those planes -- was someone there to check the engines?

Robert Hemingway: Yeah, the ground crews checked it.

Interviewer: Make sure it was flyable?

Robert Hemingway: Well, till they thought it was. I had an interesting experience. One time, I was in Brussels. I had been there a couple days. I had a couple days off, and when I got ready to leave Brussels, there were two planes there -- two B-17s -- that were ready to be flown back. Well, I and my copilot were there and there was another pilot there. He didn't have a copilot. So I said to him, "You take my copilot. I'll use my flight engineer as my copilot and we'll fly these two planes back to B53," which was our base. It was all well and good, except as soon as that plane got off the ground, it started to go just like that, and the trim tabs were all out of whack. I said, "Butler, hold that control stick down. Don't let it go up." We had the throttles on full and I was feeding the trim tabs in. Finally, I got it to where it would fly straight and level and then we were alright, but that was a hairy experience, you know.

Interviewer: I can imagine.

Robert Hemingway: 21 years old, you're not very smart.

Interviewer: After your missions, you still did a lot of dangerous things, didn't you?

Robert Hemingway: Yes.

Interviewer: Well, anyway, we thank you for coming up here and thank you for your service to our country. We really do appreciate you making the effort to come up and tell us the stories.

Elizabeth: Can I ask a question?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Can he describe the environment in a B-17 at high altitude?

Interviewer: Yeah, and talk to me. Don't talk to her.

Robert Hemingway: Well, I'll tell you -- the B-17. You know, when you go flying, you're in a cabin where it's all pressurized, and it's warm. But a B-17 was not like that. There was no pressurization, you had a heated flying suit on. You plugged it in the wall and hoped that it would work and most of the time it did but sometimes either one foot wouldn't work or something like that. You've got to realize that temperature drops about two degrees every 1,000 feet, and I've been up in that thing when it was 65 degrees below 0. It was cold. We had big gloves on. By the way, we had a helmet, and the helmet had flaps over your ears, you know, not like the infantry where it didn't have any. We had flaps over our ears. I always had my parachute, and I could stick my parachute underneath my seat, but I thought to myself, "You know, if I need that parachute, I may not have time to get that baby out from there." So I had unhooked one of my flaps off of my uniform and I hooked it on my parachute. I had two of them, but I always had one of them hooked on my parachute so, in case I had to get out of there, I could pull that thing out. Nobody on my crew got any purple hearts. Out of the six crews that went over there with us, three of them got shot totally. I was flying opposite the left wing of one of my dear friends that had come over with me -- a guy who I knew back in the states. He had a wife and two little girls. One minute he's there, and the next minute there's a black puff of smoke and he's gone. The whole crew -- gone. Well, my crew never got hurt. I got that piece of flack in my stomach, but by that time it had hit me, it had already come through the top of my plane, come through my instrument panel, knocked off the light on my control stick, and eventually hit me in the stomach, but I had a flack suit on. A flack suit was designed to protect you and it did. So I didn't really get hurt. I never got a purple heart or anything.

Interviewer: Well, that's something to be proud of, really. You--

Robert Hemingway: Something I'd be grateful for.

Interviewer: --and your crews survived along with you. Well, anything else, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Just maybe a little reflection on the whole war effort.

Interviewer: If you're going to talk to future generations, what would you say to them?

Robert Hemingway: Well, my situation was -- we were attacked. We had to go to war to protect ourselves, or we'd all be speaking Japanese or German. The situation now is a little different. I have a grandson who's in the Army. My wife and I went back to his graduation from basic. He's now going through airborne school. He's in the Special Forces, and he's been in it. Every once in a while, he says, "We finished this phase of training, we're starting that phase of training. He's a good boy. He didn't want to go to school when he graduated from high school. He didn't want to go on a mission. He wanted to go in the service. It has made a real man out of him. So, we're proud of him and we know he'll have a lot of experience which will be hard for him, but it's helped him to grow up. You know, the service lets people be what they wanted to be anyhow. If they wanted to be a slob, they can be a slob in the service. If they want to do something worthwhile in their life, the service is a good place. There are plenty of schools, there's plenty of training. It was wonderful to see how Nick shaped up when he was in basic. Straight as an arrow, he'd march down the field like a real man. I think it's been beneficial for him and it can be to anybody. But some people, you know, they make out of it what they want to make out of it. It's true, some people get hurt. Some people get killed. That's the case, and that's tragic, but it's the way it is.

Interviewer: Well, Robert, thanks again for sharing those thoughts with us and coming up here today. Thanks again for your service to our country. We appreciate that effort.

Robert Hemingway: You're welcome. I hope I get a copy of this.

Interviewer: Yeah

End of recording.