

Interview of Thomas McCormick Hill.

Interviewer: -- and where were you born.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Thomas McCormick Hill, born in Eureka, Utah, September 16th, 1920. And, my rank was tech sergeant in the Air Force and a radio operator in the Air Force.

Interviewer: When did you go into the Air Force?

Thomas McCormick Hill: I went into the Air Force -- I signed up in April of '42, and was called to duty in October of 42.

Interviewer: And you went through a series of training in state side, and when did you finally get to Europe?

Thomas McCormick Hill: When did I finally get --

Interviewer: Yeah, when did you finally get to Europe?

Thomas McCormick Hill: In 44, we left Cuming, Nebraska. We were at Cuming, Nebraska waiting for transportation to Europe. Whether we were going to fly an airplane to Europe or whether we were going to take a boat. And, we were assigned a ship. So we went to the New York harbor, and waited there at some small base and waited for the ship to take us away. And, the day that we left was the day that the Queen Mary left as well. And they were in something like a three day trip overseas, and we were on an 11 day convoy.

Interviewer: You arrive in England and what happened?

Thomas McCormick Hill: We arrived in England and we arrived in -- what's the town, Carol?

Family Member: Liverpool.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Liverpool. We arrived in Liverpool, and it was quite startling. First, the trip over was like we were on glass water. It was just absolutely beautiful, and the ocean was absolutely calm. So we had a very lovely trip over, my first experience on a ship, and we arrived in Liverpool and Liverpool showed the marks of the war, our first introduction into the war. And all around the entrance to Liverpool were sunken ships. And we had to park there and so, someone from Liverpool drove our ship into Liverpool. And, we docked at Liverpool ultimately, and when we disembarked, we trained to London to Heathrow Airport.

Interviewer: And, when did you get to your air base and did you start flying training missions immediately?

Thomas McCormick Hill: No. When we were -- we went to Heathrow Airport and had about two weeks of instructions by Canadian fliers. And these are guys who had flown 60 and 80 combat missions. And, uh, they're only -- and they were resting for a moment. Others were flying, but the ones that were there were rotating into teaching. And so they were telling us some of the, what to expect in combat. And they were very, very wonderful guys and their only vision of ending the war was to be shot down. They were just going to keep flying their missions until they couldn't.

Interviewer: Unlike American crews who came home after a certain number of missions, they just flew until the war ended?

Thomas McCormick Hill: That's right, very -- it was very damning because they had no hopes of coming home, only till the war ended. But we learned from them that the

Germans were very good at what they were doing, and that their equipment was very good, and that whatever concept you might have of the enemy upgraded because they were very good.

Interviewer: I want to hear about your first mission and tell me, because we want to know what it's like to sit in there and what you must have been feeling and everything you must have saw, smelled and heard going on around you. So tell us about that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Do you want from the time they got us out of bed in the morning until we went on the mission?

Interviewer: Well, tell us about take off.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Okay, well, we had not done this before, and we were on the apron where our airplane was and we were preparing to fly the mission to Ludwigshafen. And, uh, the ground crew was helping us because we didn't know the routines. The P-51 guns on the airplane had a shell form that you had to put the working parts of the gun in. But you didn't put them in there until you were airborne. And so, they were helping us with the procedures of things. And, when we got -- everything was new to us, we were green as could be. And when we got everything put together in the ground crews were satisfied, then we were ready and of course, the take-offs began and the people regulating the degree, or when you took off among all the airplanes, I think we had 33 airplanes flying that day. And, uh, so we had to take off in our turn. And we had also had to explain to us where we belonged in the formation. So, we took off and it was a bright sun-shiny day, and we circled, went to the assembling place and we circled to get to high altitude, and I was busy with my radio stuff. I was supposed to take radio transmissions every few minutes and I was getting oriented in that. And after about two, two and a half hours or more, I called the pilot and I said, "Where are we in Germany?" He said, "We're still getting ready in formation and leaving. We haven't left yet." And he said, "We've

only got 50 percent of our fuel left." So, these were all new experiences. And, so going in circles and getting to altitude of 30,000 feet took a long time. And after we got to altitude, there was a certain place in the formation of the Eighth Air Force that we had to fly into to be properly located in the group of airplanes. And we flew to Ludwigshafen, Germany. And, going there -- we could see the ground very well. And at some point, we saw a rocket fire off to our left. I was at the left window with the left gunner and we were watching this thing and laughing at what poor shots these guys were, because this thing was miles away over there and coming up way out of bounds. And then there was a flack patch pattern off to our left that we thought we were going to fly by. And, so we were glad we weren't going to fly through that stuff. And as we flew on, the contrail from the got closer and close and closer and when he got to our altitude, he was about a half mile away. And, then when we flew on father, we got to our initial point, and that's the point that we stabilized our speed and our altitude and go directly to the target. And that took us right into this big mass of flack. And all of this time, when we got into flack, I was the guy that was supposed to take the bundle of strips --

Interviewer: Chaff.

Thomas McCormick Hill: -- chaff. And put that in there as quickly as I could, because that distracted the radar, the metallic on one side and it would interfere with the radar.

Interviewer: These are radar controlled guns?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Mm-hmm, yeah. And so, that was my duty to sit down on the waist and stick chaff down the chute as fast as I could, and in doing that, I had a helmet on that was a huge thing and every time I put my head down to put chaff in the chute, the helmet would hit me in the nose and tip over and hit me in the nose and so I took it off and about

ten seconds after I took it off, I got hit with a flying piece of chaff that just flew by and scratched my helmet -- it was that close. So I put it back on again. And the emotions that we were going through, uh, were so intense because we -- this was new to us, and you can never train for real bullets. All of a sudden, this was real. And we were in a situation we'd never been in before and had never really been prepared before, and it's really nobody's fault because you can't get prepared for somebody shooting at you. And so, it was very nerve-racking and very intense and prayers were abundant and when we flew to the target, we dropped our bombs and came home and we had some damage and we couldn't come home with the formation, so we came home by ourselves. And that's usually very dangerous because the Germans like to get a hold of anybody that was flying by themselves. So we were very fortunate that we got back fine. But it was a terribly intense experience from take off to landing, and the one wonderful thing at landing is that P-51s that came part way with us would dive down over the runway and barrel roll straight off into the sky. And they'd each do that and fly off. So, that was quite an experience.

Interviewer: Later on, you were in a mission where you lost 14 B-17s in one mission.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me about that mission.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it was a mission where we were flying along, again, in the few clouds in the sky. But mostly clear. And, uh, going along nicely and all of a sudden, we heard that there were a pack of Germans coming our way and P-51s were coming to protect us. And again, I was looking out my radio window this time. Radio window was just a small window over the wing, leaning edge of the wing, and I could see them off to the left flying around, buzzing around and planes falling and smoke trailing and fire, some fire. And

then I heard -- our group was getting hit. And so, I went back to the waist to see and the planes were like bees below us, buzzing around and shooting off bombers and wings coming off and motors on fire and couple of them exploded, just a -- and this seemed like an hour's worth of activity, and it was probably three minutes. Just amazing. Huh, the -- so, when it was over, the impression was how fast this happened and then you gotta really be prepared, because I was not prepared for activity that fast. I was not prepared that the fighter bomber contact would be that deadly and that quick. And it ended up that we lost the 14 B-17s, and I think it was right up to our airplane that we lost them. But, they lost -- on checking in after the mission and counting, I think we had over 30 other fighters and they had 14 of the hundred bomb group bombers, which was a bad trade in personnel. So we got 30 of them and they got 140 of us.

Interviewer: You write about in that mission that there was a kid from Texas who was a top --

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yes.

Interviewer: -- hold on just a second.

(Low voices conversing).

Crew Member: Do you have any idea who that could be?

Interviewer: No, can you wait a minute? Just a sec.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Sure.

(Break in recording).

Interviewer: All right, you saw -- you were telling about a kid that was a braggart from Texas, and what happened on that mission? Tell us what you saw.

Thomas McCormick Hill: One of the things I saw looking out of the window was a B-17 under attack, and it happened to be a friend of mine, who was the engineer in that and so he was the top turret gunner, and he and I, uh, had a conflict of personalities. We just never backed away from each other and we just had a wall of dislike. But, I was so impressed because he stayed to the end and stayed fighting while the airplane was falling into the clouds the last time I saw him. He made no attempt to get out, and probably couldn't anyway because you have to be very close to an escape hatch to get out. But, uh, I honored the guy very much.

Interviewer: Um, this is a little off the subject, but tell me about the frozen orange. That's funny.

Thomas McCormick Hill: I would always take an orange on a mission with us because they were always long, and when, by the time I thought it was time to eat the orange, it was hard as a baseball. And so I'd have to wait until we landed, and then it took too long to thaw it and so, uh, sometimes I'd put a hole in them and suck the juice, and other times just leave them.

Interviewer: And that brings us to the topic of how cold it was. Describe to someone who wasn't there how cold it got in that B-17.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it's surprising. There's a standard rule of reality, and that's you lose two degrees for every 1,000 feet in elevation you go and, uh, as we got into fall and the weather got cooler, we were in 60, 65 degrees below zero almost every day up that high. And, uh we had these big leather sheepskin coats on and trousers and boots and we were kept warm enough, but you were kind of like the kids that we put big, heavy, winter clothes on. You couldn't do much. The only thing that -- we had the big leather gloves on, but underneath that we had rayon so we could use -- we would have to take our gloves off if we had a jammed gun or something and had to repair something. So we'd take those off. Or we'd take our gloves off and keep the rayon on so we wouldn't stick to things.

The other thing, as you flew along, your breath would freeze and we had ice clear down the front of us that was probably, 10, 12 pounds of ice. So, you had to make -- our microphones were these buttons that you attached to your throat and you had to be sure that those things wouldn't get too much ice where they would hang away from you.

Interviewer: So how long would you be at this altitude?

Thomas McCormick Hill: For hours, we would get up there probably somewhere just in the coast of Germany, and we'd be up there, I'd say for three hours, most times. Depending upon where you flew your missions, but it was very cold.

Interviewer: All right, okay. Tell us about gun maintenance, what you had to do at those altitudes to keep those guns going. You talked about the rayon on your hands. Tell us again what would happen to your flesh if you touched metal at that high altitude.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, if you touched the cold metal, you'd stick right to it, and so you had to be very careful not to stick right to it. And the operation of your gun determined, was determined by the oiling that you did when you were on the ground. You had to learn to do very fine oiling, and have the gun work freely.

And if you did anything that caused a little moisture, bubble or something like that to be in your oil, your gun would stick. And so, it was an art that you developed. And everybody developed their own art and no one wanted someone else to oil their gun because you did it your way and you're responsible for it to run.

Interviewer: Tell me about the mission where you had to jump on the frozen bomb bay doors. Tell us about that mission.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it makes me laugh even though it was very serious. But, we were flying along and we were on the initial point, headed for the target. And the -- our bomb bays wouldn't open. And the pilot called me and asked me if I could do something to unfreeze the bomb bay doors. They seemed to be frozen. And so, I went in and then I remembered that I had used the relief tubes, and it had backed up and flooded over, and there was an ice pack on the mechanism that opened the door. So, I had the -- there's the bomb bay doors and there's a path way from the radio room to the pilot's department that's about ten inches wide. And, they had ropes on it like felt ropes in a theatre that you'd hang on to, so I had to get down on the bomb bay doors and put a parachute on, of course, and hang on to those ropes and jump on the bomb bay doors and they finally broke open about that far and they started opening slowly and the, as they opened wide, I was standing on one side -- there was a ledge or something that I was standing on. And, looking down, there were fighter pilots below me fighting. There were two or three parachutes, there was all kind of stuff between me and the

ground and it was almost looking at television before television what was going on, and it was quite interesting. But that interest was quelled by a damn mad pilot because of carelessness by me.

Interviewer: I didn't realize you had a relief tube and urine can freeze at that altitude.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, I didn't even think of it, but I will now if I ever do it again.

Interviewer: Tell me about the guy that you encountered in your group, or your unit that was flack happy. He'd flown too many missions and been shot down. Tell us all about him and what happened.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, this poor fellow had lost easily three airplanes and three crews where he had been shot down and he'd been the only survivor, and he'd find some miraculous way to get out of Germany and get back to the French underground and get out and his stories were just unique and, at least three times, he had done that and he was very psychologically depressed. And he was very -- he'd sit up at night and talk about just in rambling things about what's going on in the world. We were -- we knew whether we were going to fly a mission or not because the officers' quarters had a signal system of red, yellow, and green lights. And if the red light was on, you had a mission for the next morning. If the yellow was on, you were on standby. You could have. And so, in either one of these cases, you went to bed and got prepared for a mission. The green, you didn't prepare and you knew you could sleep in the next morning. He would sit up all night long talking with the various or talking to nobody, just talking. And he was very difficult guy. We didn't know how to handle him. And there was a time when the guys took him outside and beat him up and he ended up in

the hospital. We never saw him again, but he was just a -- he was a terrific, heroic guy, and somehow funneled his way back to England. He had some kind of a magic about him that no one understood, but you know, we had another person in the outfit, he was an officer and his name, I think, was Goldberg -- or Greenberg. And he had the same kinds of experiences, and when I quit flying and we were on our way to Southampton to catch a boat, this fellow had been shot down again and had returned through the underground in France. So, he had experiences similar to this guy in our barracks. But he was so troublesome that we just couldn't sleep with him doing this all night.

Interviewer: Tell me about the fellow that committed suicide on a mission.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, he was pretty close to us. When we joined the 100th bomb group, there were three of the pilots that were close (inaudible) where they both played together in Indiana, and then a guy named Baker that was part of the threesome.

Lieutenant -- he was a pilot. And, he had a great crew and this other crew member, sandy haired boy that was just a really nice young man and we spent time together and he was very normal. Just as normal as you could imagine, and on one of the missions, he just went back, opened the waist door and jumped out, no parachute. And he -- it tells you that there are days where you are not yourself. You do things that you wouldn't normally do, because he was not the suicidal type. He was just -- it was scary because he was too much like me, I think. That was very impressionable.

Interviewer: Tell me about -- there's several things I want to get to, tell me about "friendly fire." Accidentally shooting down your own aircraft.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, we saw some studies on that, and we were losing, according to the studies -- 28 percent of the losses were from our own guns. And, there

were too many people shooting at things going through the formation and you had planes along side of you or above you or below you. And the Germans often -- the Göring Outfit, whose airplanes were red and they would spin around -- the propellers were red. But when they were headed back to base, they'd dive through you just to terrorize you. And you had a split second to shoot them, and they were gone. But, if you shot them, you probably shot the bomber next to you or shot people in it or shot them down, and those were just the accidental happenings of war.

Interviewer: You saw a terrible collision between a B-24 and a B-17, this ammo dump.

Thomas McCormick Hill: No, it was a P-47 and a B-24. And they were flying -- we had a cloud cover and I guess it must have extended some elevation, and we heard this crash and pretty soon, the nose of a B-24 -- there's a turret there, and the turret fell onto the field. And then, I think I have the sequence wrong. First, the P-47 crashed. Came right through the clouds, straight down and crashed. Then the ball turret came through, and unknown to us, the P-47 hit into an ammunition dump, and there were bombs going off and boats going off and the fire in the munitions, and it was a day that we weren't flying, obviously. So myself and five other guys decided to go to the ammunition dump and see, curiosity. And then we had to go through a forest road, a road that went through the trees, and as we got closer and closer to the bomb dump, we could hear a bomb go off and something going through the air, "Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh." And wondering what that was, and one went through and all of a sudden, the 50 caliber bullets went off and so we knew what it was and we jumped on the ground and -- a bunch of us -- and then another one, those twirly things come shooting and we are still on the ground and one of the guys had a hole in the thigh of his pants, and we couldn't stretch his pants

any way like this to show how the bullet got in and out. And he just had the hole that scratched around his leg and went out the other side. And we decided we needed to leave that area.

Interviewer: All right, we're going to go to October 14th, the Cologne mission.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: A lot of things happened on that day, memorable things -- excuse me, I forgot to turn off my phone. I should have done that. Tell us about that mission, it was a really memorable one.

Thomas McCormick Hill: It is, yeah. That's when our co-pilot got wounded. That was our 22d mission, and flying to Cologne and we got into some flack that was just huge bursts of flack, I've never seen them that big. And I decided -- they were 155 millimeter, and I don't know. They were huge bursts. But, we got attacked by fighters and our co-pilot, Bill Merchan, there was an ME 109 coming right toward us, head first. And he opened the window and kept shooting his hand gun at the thing, and he finally threw the hand gun at it. But he eventually got hit with a piece of flack that was just a piece about an inch long and kind of a rough arrow shape. And he got hit in the right shoulder, right up here. And we don't know what else happened to it. But, he was suffering more than he should have from a shoulder wound. And we gave him morphine, and the morphine that was given was in kind of a metallic tube and they were small metallic tubes that I kept two or three in my heated glove, otherwise, they would freeze. You couldn't use them. You'd thaw them out and clip the tip of it off and give morphine. And that's the only thing we had other than tourniquets to stop any blood. But he was hurt worse than we knew and didn't find out how badly he was hurt until he got to the hospital and we were going to land the airplane. The pilot was in Holland, and Bill wanted to come back to base. He

said he was okay, he could make it, and so we came back to base. And, we were able to get him into an ambulance and into the hospital quicker that way.

Interviewer: Tell us about that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: And, is that the same mission that we lost our engines, our four engines?

Interviewer: I think you did, there was a lot that happened that mission.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Okay, we were -- we got hit with a big burst of flack and we lost three engines, and we fell easily 5,000 feet, and by then, the pilot was able to get two of them back on. And we -- he got us leveled out and everything, and we got flying back from the fight and he dropped the bomb somewhere and we struggled home, but made it home. Just enough power to stay at altitude. As a matter of fact, he may have been losing altitude little by little just to keep up air speed.

Interviewer: Let's go back and when I was at your house, you phrased it in a really interesting way. You said, "You were in a B-17 that was doing what a B-17 should never do." I think that's how you put it, and you showed me how it went. You made some hand gestures and what happened to your B-17?

Thomas McCormick Hill: You are talking about the time we fell? We were flying in this mission, and this was after we lost the co-pilot, and there was a -- someone from the 8th Air Force Headquarters who flew with us this day and we never felt comfortable with any change of the crew in any way. But this guy, I guess, needed some combat time or something. And he was in the co-pilot seat and we were flying up around 30,000, 33,000 feet. And either he or the pilot saw somebody underneath that was coming up or we were settling down on them. In order to avoid a collision, they pulled the stick back. We went straight up in the air, 300 or 400

feet, and then we flipped over backwards and went straight down and the -- two of the engines were running away. They were increasing in rotation speed to the degree that we were just absolutely shaking, vibrating so fast that you knew something was going to give. You knew something had to give if it kept it up. And it kept it up for quite a spell, but we didn't lose a propeller tip or we didn't lose an engine or a wing, anything like that would take a wing off. And so, eventually we heard the engine starting to decrease in speed, so we knew the pilot and this new co-pilot had -- whatever they did to slow the engine down to normal speed, but we must have fallen 10,000 feet or 12,000 feet or something like that, because everybody flying in our group thought that we wouldn't make it, and when we got back again, we had to come back by ourselves and when I got back and had the post mission interrogation, everyone said they saw us go through the clouds. And we did come back.

Interviewer: Tell us, you were in the radio compartment during this moment. Tell us what's going on around you when you're tumbling like that and your space and your -- what you saw during this moment.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, can you enlighten me a little bit?

Interviewer: I imagine there were a lot of centrifugal forces and this bomber is gyrating, what is happening to you?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Absolutely. Well, first of all, you just -- when they pull you up, the centrifugal force just pulls you down and then you flip over, why, you're somewhere in the room floating around and the, and then at some point when you start to pull out of your dive, you're on the floor with your parachute chest pack. You try to pick it up and you can't pick it up, you know, it's too heavy. But mostly, the thing that was in my mind was,

you're either going to make it or you're going to die in the next three minutes, because we were taking about three minutes to fall. And, so kind of nice to find you survived.

Interviewer: When you're on the radio, can you hear over the radio what is happening in another plane as it's going down? Can you hear that kind of chatter from other planes in distress?

Thomas McCormick Hill: No, you can't.

Interviewer: All right, tell us about the Phantom P-38.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, we were -- I don't recall a mission, but we were flying along and we were under attack. This could have been the time that Bill Merchan got shot. We, because he was actually trying to shoot the thing down with his pistol, shoot down the attacking plane, which is ME 109. When that got over, I was back on a waist gun, the right waist gun and observing an ME 109 out a few thousand yards, kind of watching him. And this P-38 appeared just about here, and all of a sudden it come up right there about 100 yards, and I could have had him. So the first thing I thought it was a P-38, and then I realized it had to be the enemy. But he was gone by the time I realized I should have shot him.

Interviewer: This was a captured plane?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Oh, yeah. They did that. They -- what they did mostly was capture B-17s and restore them. And they'd make gunships out of them, they'd come in with the thing full of other -- with several soldiers in them and they'd shoot everything around them. And you figured that they were an American plane and they'd been injured and they needed to join the group for safety. But, it got to the point where you wouldn't get strangers join your group.

Interviewer: I want to go to mission number 31. Tell us about that day.

December 29th, correct? 1944?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me about that, that's your last mission, correct?

Thomas McCormick Hill: It is.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Let's see, we bombed --

Interviewer: Frankfurt.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Frankfurt. We were, uh, flying to the mission and it was our 31st mission, and when we -- we had a little different instruction on this mission that when we dropped our bombs, usually when you dropped your bombs, then you dropped a thousand feet in your airplane and you turned either left or right, of course, everybody in a formation had to do the same thing. And mostly, you drop a thousand feet and turn right so the Germans would have to re-set their guns. And because Frankfurt is a long, narrow railroad town, there were guns on both ends of the town, and if we went through the center of the town and dropped our bombs on the railroad, they were supposed to drop a thousand feet and go straight. But, the lead plane dropped a thousand feet and turned right, and he turned right into the guns. And so everybody had to go with him, and we got shot up really bad, and the guy on our right in the formation got shot up really bad, and he was on his last mission. But he got through it, we got through it. But, he caught on fire and got the fire out, but advised his crew to jump, which they did, and then he couldn't get out of his seat. He was buckled in some way and he couldn't get out. Well, he made it back by himself. And, we were on -- we had an engine on fire and I was getting ready to jump out because fire in your airplane, 30 seconds and it blows up. I got to

the door and decided that if I get out, the Germans are going to kill me anyway. So I just said, "Well, I'll stay here." So, I stayed with the airplane and our pilot had told us to jump, and in the meantime, he got shot in the left leg and then the calf of his leg was all muscle, and just torn away. And so they -- they had to take care of him and give him some morphine and give him a tourniquet and lay him on the floor up in the front and Calvin Dollar, the other tech sergeant on board, took his place in the pilot's seat. And so Calvin, the pilot stayed with the plane to get through the fire and to get it out and get through so that things were stabilized, and then he was taken care of. And Calvin took over his seat and the co-pilot we had was a co-pilot who did not have a crew. I don't know why he didn't, except he was very unstable. And he just was losing his head. So, Dollar was flying the airplane and had to fly it and he was trying to get the guy to land it and the guy wouldn't land it. But, in the meantime, after having put the fire out, we struggled to get back to base and we were flying fairly low and flying from Frankfurt back and Calvin did a magnificent job. The first air base we ran into in England, he landed the thing. And we made it.

Interviewer: You had some interesting -- I read that you had this interesting thing that would happen to you. You would dream of people being lost.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, I had a dream one time of one of the crews being shot down. And, it was the next mission we on the next day, and they were shot down. And I think it was the (inaudible) thing. And, then about a couple weeks later, I dreamed again another group got shot down, our friends. And I wondered whether to tell them to cancel out or

something. But I thought, "That's silly, everything is going to be fine." They got shot down. So, I got real spooked about that. But I never dreamed it again.

Interviewer: Tell me, what's it like to lose friends like that, to actually watch them go down? What are you feeling when you see that? How do you deal with that?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it's a vacant feeling. You know, you're helpless, you're useless, you're watching your friends go through the agony of trying to survive. Even though you can't see it, you know what's going on. And it's just very sobering because it could be you, you know? And it could be anybody, and the odds are, if you are in the way of the bullet, it's going to be you. And so, strange feelings, just odd feelings.

Interviewer: Tell me what red flack means and why it scares you, red bursts in a flack.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Red bursts in a flack, if you go into a target and there's a lot of flack and all of a sudden you see red flack, that means that the flack is going to quit and the fighter planes can come in, the German fighter planes. And so, when we saw that, we knew that we had to start looking for airplanes. And we knew that the German attack was different.

Crew Member: Jeff, have him talk about which was scarier, anticipating flack or anticipating Germans.

Interviewer: Is there any way to weigh that? What was more frightening, flack, or fighters?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Fighters. You know, flack, well, I guess we were successful in flack. But fighter planes were deadly. If they came after you, they're going to get you. So, and it's quick. The 50 caliber bullets on an airplane, and everybody shooting at them, is

not very good and, you know, the fighter plane is attacking you whether it's above you, off to the side, or below you. In order to lead you, it always has to lead you in an attack and it has to come back to the tail gunner. If you're flying like this and the fighter plane wants to lead you, you gotta come like this, and if it's up here or down here. So, you've got to know defluxion shooting, and when you think you should shoot in front of them, you should be shooting behind them. And it's a very difficult thing to get used to. So, we're not as accurate. We didn't get under direct attack very often, and the crews that flew before us got under attack a lot, and they probably had a lot more experience with how you shoot them down.

Interviewer: Tell me about near collisions, you talked about that, how frightening that is.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: I guess you talked about that with pulling back on the yoke and all that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Here's one, 5,000 planes in the air. I can't imagine what you must see. Describe that to us. People will never see that again in the world.

Thomas McCormick Hill: No.

Interviewer: Tell us about it.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, there's planes as far as you can see in front of you and behind you, and the attacks go on all day. And you're just coming and going, and see airplanes everywhere. And it's a marvel at how many airplanes we have, how much material we have, and how many people we have flying them. But it's just a revelation of the power of the 8th Air Force.

Interviewer: Describe what your duties were, tell us what you're doing on a mission. You're a raid you operator and you have a gun with very limited fire. Tell us about that, what you're doing.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, let me tell you something related to that to begin with. We were flying in the states up around Michigan from Tennessee. And, I had a frequency in the radio room about as big as this table here, and Mitch Marcian, one of the waist gunners, I asked him to come and help me take the hatch off the B-17 because it was hot. And we took the hatch off. And this thing was about 18 inches wide and four feet long or something like that.

Interviewer: It's above you?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yeah. And we took it off with difficulty, and stupidity we got it off. And flying along and all of a sudden, my frequency reader went, "Choop!" Up through the hatch. And that could be me! And it's just creating a big vacuum in the radio room, and I got Mitch Marcian back and said, "Now, look. We're going to go out of this hole if we don't do it right." And so we got it -- we lined it up to within a couple inches where it ought to be, and then moved it up and the suction just took it up and filled it and we were able to latch it. But, it was a terribly dumb thing to do.

Interviewer: So, you're sitting there, and you told me you had to sit on ammo crates. And this is during combat, tell us about what you're seeing in your immediate vicinity.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it's interesting that -- I'm sitting on ammunition crates, and I have a desk here and a radio and I have my notes and everything and we hit a thermal where we drop 50 feet or something like that, and my paper and my pens and pencils and everything and everything goes up to where your head hits the ceiling, and then

comes down, everything in place. And, I do the same. I'm sitting like this and I'm suspended in midair, and I come down in place. And it's kind of interesting.

Interviewer: So, you're not belted in or anything?

Thomas McCormick Hill: No, the radio guys are never belted in. And I can relate other experiences.

Interviewer: Well, there's just a couple more that I want to get to, a little bit of philosophy. This was interesting -- girls in the chow line.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yeah.

Interviewer: That is really unusual. Tell me about that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, the air base would have a dance probably monthly and on special occasions, more often than that. And they would invite the girls from around the air base to the big dance at the hangar and send buses out and collect them at Diss, a little town about eight miles away. And we picked them up and brought them in and had the dance and then took the girls home after the dance. But some of the GI's also took them home, so they -- next morning I would be laying and there would be girls in front of you and back of you and ready for a good meal. And that was not uncommon. I don't know if you recognized that we were celebrating our 200th mission with Glenn Miller. And Glenn Miller and the singers and everything, and this was sometime in late November or early December of '44. And there it was about ten days later that he turned up missing. And I think ours was the last people that he entertained

Interviewer: Tell us about dressing for a mission. We're doing a series on flack and what it's like. Tell us about how you have to dress and putting on that flack suit and how heavy this is. Just tell us because people don't know.

Thomas McCormick Hill: We'd dress -- the way we dressed with our flying suits to stay warm. And then in the airplane, we'd have flack suits that go over the front of you and the back of you and they're just little panels of metal. So, and you clasp them at the shoulder. But those things, I'd say 15 to 20 pounds. And, if you stooped over, they'd hang. They were very cumbersome. You mostly didn't wear them, but you would put them along the side of the airplane at your legs. And they did some good. But I -- they were very difficult to work with.

Interviewer: Could you wear a parachute wearing a flack suit? Did you wear both?

Thomas McCormick Hill: No, you wouldn't wear both. A parachute would hook on your harnesses here. What we had on our harness is -- did you see the silk map of Europe? We had that escape map and our escape picture, and some medications of some sort. But, so they were always with us.

Interviewer: Okay, now I want to get into your philosophy of what happened to you and what you think about war now. This is very interesting to us. We'd like to hear your opinions --

Crew Member: I'm sorry, he was just on this. He has an escape picture, can he explain why he needed it?

Interviewer: Explain why you needed an escape picture, you as a civilian. Explain that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: We had -- the French underground was very active and very successful and if you had an escape picture, they could use that for your passport.

Interviewer: Look at Rick as though he asked that, or Jeff, sorry.

Thomas McCormick Hill: I'm sorry.

Interviewer: It's all right.

Crew Member: Can you start over? It's okay.

Thomas McCormick Hill: The, am I okay now?

Interviewer: You're fine.

Thomas McCormick Hill: The escape picture is the picture you're carrying because the French underground would need a picture for your passport.

Crew Member: Look at Jeff when you're answering the question. Jeff, ask him the question.

Interviewer: Okay, why did you have a picture of you as a civilian on your body and an escape map? What was this all for?

Crew Member: And answer him.

Interviewer: Yeah, look at me.

Crew Member: Don't look at me.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Okay, I'm sorry, okay. The escape picture was for, if you were captured by the French underground, they could use that picture in manufacturing a passport getting you out of the country. And so, we were dressed like a civilian from the waist up, a passport picture. And it was very useful for our escaping.

Interviewer: All right, now, I want to get -- I'm real interested in your philosophy of what you said you learned from war, what you think about war now, and today's context. Would you tell us about that?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, let me summarize it in a way. You know, I was in a family of 12, and I was a fifth child, and I grew up during the depression and I

developed a philosophy. At the time I was a very holy boy, and relied on my church for feelings of worth. And, to this day, I still do. And so, I tried to become a person that was a worthy person, and that was a valuable person. And as I went through life, I developed that and when I got into the service, I was told I'd join the pilot training and I was told we were the cream of the crop in the US and that we were outstanding people, and then I washed out of the training period and when I got into the bombers, we were flying home one day and thinking about whether we were going to get across the English Channel or not, and we were told that if we're told to jump, we had to leave because we were expendable, and that the airplane and the components were more valuable than we were. So, that's -- and now I'm in this session where I'm being treated as a hero. And I, I haven't changed myself. But the perceptions of the political world when they need you are great and wonderful and whatever. But when they get you, you're cannon fodder. I don't know if you want to use these kinds of things --

Interviewer: Sure.

Thomas McCormick Hill: -- or not. So, the youth of the world are used to solve problems. Your children and my children and other children and the heroes are the poor kids that didn't make it. You know, they gave everything. If you'll notice my letter to my children on the front of my write-up, I had my oldest boy before I went overseas, and the rest of my children I've had since then, and they're very valuable people. And so, I've been turned into a pacifist because you're used in the military to solve solvable problems that can be done some other way and somehow, we haven't told the world what the value of our children are. And they are immeasurable if we'd give them a chance to flower.

Interviewer: You were telling me whether it was worth those lives. I thought it was fascinating. I really want you to tell me what you said to me that day in your living room, whether it was worth losing those men.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it's not worth it. I don't recall what I said, but it's not worth losing. Can you give me a clue?

Interviewer: That's what you were saying. You were telling, it wasn't worth those lives.

Thomas McCormick Hill: It's not worth losing our children, it's not worth losing the lives of our children, and the future of this world depends upon our children saving the world. The -- you folks that are your age are productive and you're saving this country and you're saving this world because you're contributing your talent and you're helping the world develop in a way. And I'm beyond that, you know, I'm not helping the world in any way except philosophizing a little bit.

Interviewer: That was fine, yeah.

Thomas McCormick Hill: I don't know just how I said it before.

Interviewer: You said to me, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but they're your words, said, "It wasn't worth those lives." You just said it, it was a declarative statement that you said to me and I thought it was fascinating because we've heard all -- Sally and I have heard all sorts of different attitudes about the war and about what happens, and I thought that was very interesting.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it wasn't worth those lives because we don't have any idea what we lost. We don't understand what they really gave, what these kids that are the real heroes, what they really gave. I know what I gave, but it doesn't make me a hero. You

know, there's outstanding musicians, there's outstanding doctors, there's outstanding people everywhere. And we wiped them out.

Crew Member: Can I ask a question? Is this a philosophy that was pretty steady in your mind when you, at the end of the war 65 years ago, or is this a philosophy that's built up through time?

Thomas McCormick Hill: It's the philosophy of an old man. It's the philosophy that -- it's what's happened in my life, and I've had a good life, but even though I've had a good life, the value of my existence has been measured in different ways throughout my life. And, even though I knew what the measure was when I was a child and when I was in the service, I gave everything I could. But, just generally, society is the dominant force in your life and society uses you and uses your talent how it wants to. And that's not very profound.

Crew Member: Where did that last question just go? Are you, does it bother you that World War II is so romanticized?

Thomas McCormick Hill: I love it. You know --

Crew Member: Talk about that.

Thomas McCormick Hill: World War II laid dormant for many, many years. And even the survivors of World War II fought to keep their experiences out of their life, and you people have really done a great job in making us recognize what we've contributed and what -- the friends we knew in the service, who didn't come home, what they contributed. Uh, and I think this has been a wonderful example of us and society and you folks and society exploring what we have contributed. And I think the adulation is misplaced when it's us living people who are looked upon.

Crew Member: One last question, sorry. I keep saying, "One last question."
That was great, that was wonderful. I enjoy his candid, honest -- when you think of your crew, I want your heart-to-heart, the buddy thing -- I've heard these men in their 80's say, "I was in love with every man on my ship." Air, sea, you know. And I can see why, but can you just maybe talk about --

Interviewer: Yeah, your friendship.

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, we had a very well organized responsible crew, and our pilot was well trained, and part of his training was our co-pilot who has a long history of flying airplanes and wanted to get in combat and they wouldn't let him come as a pilot, but he taught our pilot how to fly the airplane. And we had some rascals in our crew that were rascals, and we had a meeting when we just determined where we were in the 100th Bomb Group was a target for the Germans, that when we got in there to fly a mission, we had to be sober, we had to be a crew, we had to be together, and we had certain rules to follow. And I respect every one of those guys, I don't love them, I respect them. But they did their duty well. And we survived because we worked as a team. There were crews that would take their gun out of their mounting as soon as they hit England and they'd get shot down. And --

Interviewer: From enemy fighters?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Fighters would follow you, and they'd wait till you had no defense. So, these precautions, you had to not disarm till you were on the ground, and this is the one thing that comes to mind now, but there were other things that we, as a crew, demanded of each other. And it worked very well.

Interviewer: Why did that call the 100th Bomb Group "The Bloody 100?"

Thomas McCormick Hill: Well, it's the -- Hitler, you know, this is all stuff that comes down from, I don't know where. Hitler is supposed to have said that he was going to wipe out the 100th, because they were the first to bomb Berlin, and that any time the 100th flew, they were going to single them out and go after them. And that's where the name evolved from.

Interviewer: Can you say the name?

Thomas McCormick Hill: The 100th Bomb Group -- The Bloody 100.

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: What was it called, The Bloody 100th bomb group?

Thomas McCormick Hill: Yeah, mm-hmm. So, we had that reputation, but, and we did lose a lot of airplanes at times.

Crew Member: Wonderful.

Interviewer: We think you did wonderful.

Crew Member: Great.

Thomas McCormick Hill: I hope so --

Crew Member: Fabulous, super great.

Thomas McCormick Hill: I know I said things different from the last time we talked.

Interviewer: That doesn't mean -- it was fabulous.

Crew Member: And Jeff knows I can appreciate a pacifist.

Interviewer: Yes.

Crew Member: Yes, a pacifist veteran.

End of recording.