A Veterans Oral History

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Narrator

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Interviewer

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JG: A small town (Tracy, Minnesota) of about 3,000 population, 2,950, I believe. And it was a railroad center at one time before I was born. It existed until 1932 when everything seemed to unravel, depression years. And there were 160 jobs in that town, so you can see who paid the taxes. We had a good clinic. We had two doctors and it was a nice town to live in.

UNK: What did your parents do?

JG: My father was an inspector on the railroad. In other words, he was involved as a machinist, initially; and then he became an inspector of these things. My mother, after they were divorced started working in a downtown store. And she ran the family for quite a few years … outstanding woman.

UNK: Can I ask your age?

JG: Eighty-six.

UNK: What did you do prior to going into the military?

JG: I worked for J. C. Penney Company.

UNK: How did your military service evolve from that?

JG: They had no relationship at all. I wanted to fly and the moment that I went in they were looking for flyers. And so I wound up as a radio operator aboard a bomber.

UNK: So you were in the Air Force.

JG: The U. S. Army Air Corps, which the Air Force is a new term for it.

UNK: Were you drafted or enlisted?

JG: I was drafted.

UNK: Were you trained for a specific job and what were your duties?

JG: Yes, after the initial training, which they called basic training, I went to radio school. There we learned how to repair radio and we learned a code, how to send code. I was pretty good at that. I wasn't very good at the mechanics of radio, but I was pretty good at operation. Then we went to gunnery school. From gunnery school, we shot at balloons out of a small aircraft carrier. So we learned the rudiments of gunnery from a moving platform to a moving target. And each one of the bullets was painted. So if my color was red, all the ammunition that I drew had a red thing and would leave a red mark on the tube. Somebody else had blue they would leave. To rank us then they just counted the number of reds and blues, yellow marks on this nylon tube. I called it a balloon, but it really wasn't.

UNK: And what year did you enter the service?

JG: Forty-two, May 5th or 6th. I was in the second draft. The first draft started almost immediately after Pearl. Yes, it was, I think it was in December of 1941, and I was too young for that draft. When my birthday, would have been May 20th, they took me.

UNK: Do you have a memorable boot camp experience?

JG: Yes, I went to boot camp. My initial thing was with a bunch of Appalachians. And these fellows had no education at all. One of them was a man by the name of Herschel E. Tye, T-Y-E. We graduated and we went out on this field. The Commanding General came and just hand-picked certain people, he wanted to talk to.

Unfortunately, he got Tye. "What's your name, soldier?" "Tah." "What's your name, soldier?" "Hers-chel." He had a little tic in his voice, just like I did. "Hers-chel E. Tah." "What's your name, soldier?" "Hers-chel E. Tah, suhr." "What did you do before you got in the Army?" "Made moonshine liquor, sir." And the Commanding General bust out laughing, and he waddled off of the grounds. It was a memorable experience.

UNK: If you served during the wartime, where were you stationed and how did you travel to get to that station?

JG: Well initially, I was stationed at Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona. We learned the rudiments of contacting, I did, contacting your field, contacting and doing navigation using radio equipment. From Davis-Monthan in Tucson, I went to Albuquerque, New Mexico, next; and then we wound up in – oh, I can't even remember now. But the final place was out in the desert and during that time we learned how to fly, how to do gunnery. I didn't have a gun, so I had to assist any problem that came out.

I was the first one out the plane in the event that we had a problem. I had to open the bomb bay doors when they dropped the bombs, so I had to go down to what we called it the basement. Actually I suppose it was about 4½-5 feet

from the floor to the floor of the bomber. Then I went back up into my office and sat down and tried to keep control of the communications. Although we were not allowed to send any messages, we listened to everything that came over.

UNK: What type of plane was this?

JG: B24 ... it was called the Liberator. It was the biggest plane in the war until the B29 came along. They always glamorize the B17. It was the first one overseas and there were a lot of them. They could fly pretty high. But they could only carry one-half of the bomb load that we carried. So we were lumbering, but we couldn't get up as high as they could. When we got up to, oh 20,000, that was about it. And the B17s habitually flew at 24,000 and sometimes 27,000. So the day I got shot down the first time, we were flying at about 20,000, when I went out of the bomb bay.

UNK: You alluded to being shot down. Can you share that memory with us?

JG: Yes, the first time we were shot down by our own people. If you encountered any difficulty you were told to go to the right. In other words, drop back behind the formation and then peel off to the right. We got this shot and we're not sure whether it was actually damage as the result of this. We think it was.

We were way on the west, on the left side of the formation; so we peeled off to the left. That caused a few shots to go up in the air, too. That was the end of the shooting. We bailed out. The temperature at the place where I bailed out was 27 degrees. I knew when I landed that the temperature was going to be about 37. It turned out it was considerably warmer than that. I knew the direction of the wind. I had memorized all this, and I knew that if I came out over the channel that I would float in to the land, and this all came true. I bailed out over the channel and whatever breeze there was carried me in. Where I landed on the White Cliffs of Dover, you've heard of that? Well, I landed over that area. And do you want me to go ahead?

UNK: Yes, definitely.

JG: Anyway at this place they were mining limestone. That is the white cliffs are made of limestone. They cut this limestone off in slabs with giant saws and then they load them on donkey carts.

The donkey carts are about seven feet long and probably three feet wide. They have a truss in front and in back so the donkeys would pull them over to this place. And then this giant cable would hook them up and pull this stuff up above the cliffs where it was trucked away or transported somewhere.

When I got there I was, there was an awful lot of people there. Workers, but some way or another there seemed to be a lot of families who were there. Why, I can't tell you, whether they had heard of our going into the drink or what it was, I don't know. But anyway they, I waved to them and, of course, I had a lot of blood on my face; and I was pretty well beat up. And they put my stretcher on a donkey cart. The donkey cart took me over there and they hooked the cable up and I went up to the top. It's quite a story when you get the whole story.

Then I went to a hospital. I say hospital actually it was just a big tent. And if you can visualize a tent being about one city block in size that's about the way it was. There was no roof. It was about 12-foot poles and I would guess and then this canvas wrapped around there. Interior there was hundreds of nurses running back and forth and everybody that was there came as a result of the invasion and they might have landed someplace else, might have landed on top in the airplanes and they were brought to this place for immediate service. Bandages, splints, you know that kind of stuff. And at night, we were supposed to stay there overnight and then be moved the next day, very casually, you know?

Middle of the night, they started bringing in the V-1s. Remember the story of the V-1? V-1 is a rocket designed by Wernher von Braun and his colleagues in Germany. They were very inaccurate, thank God, and its successor was the V-2, which was very accurate. But anyway, these bombs started dropping all over, and so they loaded us into trucks, and they drove us to the airfield. Of course, there is no place to take care of wounded servicemen so they just piled us into bombers and light aircraft, anything. And I was put on a board. The board was about 24 inches wide and another fellow on the other side. I was in a small, medium-sized airplane, twin engine, and we had a nurse in between us and that's the way I went to Oxford.

UNK: Did everyone on your plane bail out during that . . .

JG: The first time, yes. Not the second time.

UNK: Now tell us a little about the second time.

JG: Well the second time we were in Munich and had bombed Munich successfully, but we had absorbed lots of damage. The fellows in the back were trying to hold a cable together, which had broken, for the ailerons. They were locking elbows back there pulling the ailerons. They had lost a lot of fluid, so the fellows urinated in their helmet to, and then fed that into the system in order to give the engine some ability to go back and forth.

But when I was shot down, the airplane just couldn't keep it up anymore. And if you can visualize a pilot and copilot, sitting there and pulling back with their feet up on the dash, you know, they were dropping pretty fast and pretty hard. So when it smashed, the airplane just completely fell apart. The front end, where I was, where the pilot and the copilot, the engineer and I were, and the navigator was down below, we all survived, except the engineer. The engineer sat on my lap, and that's a ditching procedure, what we calling "ditching."

I spread my legs, he came in between them, and he was facing the same way as I was, of course. And when it hit the water, his head came back and broke my shoulder. His hip came back and broke my knee. There was a projection on the pilot seat. I had my back to the pilot seat; and the pilot seat had a small projection of armor-protected steel which was the floor of the pilot's cabin and that projection got me in the back. I lost five projections from my spine and I was unable to walk, of course, because of that.

But by the time I got out of the hospital, about seven or eight months, I was in pretty good shape. I still had a cast. I was wearing some cast items but I could stand on my feet. I could walk.

UNK: When you were shot down, was that a particular battle or a campaign that you were [unclear] in.

JG: Yes, I never called it anything else but Munich Two, and that was just the second excursion to Munich. All the people in the back, six men lost their lives. Just the people in the front, except the fellow I held in my lap, and apparently the turret broke loose and came down and pinned him and so he never got out of it.

That's war for you. It's very deadly. They're not playing with dice, they're playing with all kinds of means. The Germans were particularly good. In the Pacific war, they had great big long missions, very long, but very little combat. In Europe every time we went over, we got combat; just about every time. I would guess 96 out of 100 flights we made, we had combat. I've made some because of fog or some reason, we couldn't bomb the target that we were trying to get. We would turn around and go back home. And then other times we diverted to another target and maybe you couldn't get on that one.

I remember the first time we went to Berlin and we couldn't get into Berlin because it was so foggy so we went home with big full bomb loads. And even then we lost people because as we crossed the coastline which was a war zone, too.

UNK: How many times a day or week would you say you went out on these?

JG: You were only allowed to fly three missions a week. Because of the weather or your own disability – my ears were always clogging up – you couldn't go. So I had several three a week. When I first went over, we had to fly 25 missions, then you could go home. We had a very high mortality rate. Out of 25 planes, we were losing about half of them.

Now when I say losing, some of the fellows bailed out over enemy territory and they were saved by farmers or the underground. And then they worked their way back to safety by going over the mountains into Spain. They were saved.

They did this in various ways. They did it by the farmers and these people who were all underground people. They were very clever. They knew the way and they passed you. They could only go so far. If a farmer who speaks a northern brand of French arrives in the southern French town, just like the United States 20 years ago. You could tell a person by their language. That is true in Europe, also. So they could only go so far with you and they would hand you off to another. Put you in a safe house, somebody would come back from there, I think, and pick you up and take you.

UNK: And this is behind enemy lines?

JG: Oh yes.

UNK: So you had allies?

JG: Yes, well, yes, you had allies in France, but you didn't have allies in Germany, of course. But there were ways to get saved in Germany. One of them was a house of prostitution. They actually had a chain that you would get you home free. Pass you from one group to another.

We had a fellow that went on a Berlin raid. His name was Reeves and he had a deep Texan accent and he got shot down in the Battle of Berlin. He stayed there for about three months. And the officer at the debriefing session said, "We have a couple of people who maintain residence in Europe, right under the nose of the Germans, and tell them to get home. If you should get shot down, tell them to get home." So that was a comedy part of the whole thing.

UNK: Where were you stationed in Europe?

JG: Stationed in Shipdham, England, which is about, oh, 40 miles from Norwich; I believe we would say Norwich. And they call it up East Anglia, up in the northeastern part of England.

UNK: Tell us about any decorations you received, or medals.

JG: Well I have three decorations that I wear. There are others. Good Conduct was one of them which has got a low rank but I had European Theater of Operations (ETO) medal; and then I have, is it three or four Battle Stars,

that I participated in. Anyway every time your group was in a battle, you got a Battle Star; and sometimes we had people who were typists, who never got out of the country, and they got those Battle Stars, too. The next one of importance was an Air Medal; and every time you flew five missions you got an Oak Leaf Cluster. I got the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters. I should have had four because I flew 23 missions. But you know how things like that get lost. The Purple Heart, of course, is anybody that's wounded in battle. It's a very important ribbon. Robert Dole wears a Purple Heart insignia in his lapel. They make a little insignia that's about three-quarters of an inch. He wears that all the time.

UNK: Do you put yours on occasionally?

JG: No. I may have at one time or another, but I don't.

UNK: You mentioned about Tye. Are there any other people that you met in the service that stand out to you and do you keep in touch with them yet?

JG: I met a fellow with whom I became very close. He and I kept in touch for a while. We no longer are in touch. He's an Englishman. He was in the Battle of North Africa and he was a first lieutenant and he was driving across there and they dropped a bomb in his lap, the Germans.

Now the story is very wonderful because he lost both legs as a result of it; but that was the end of it, no more injuries. And the reason for it was, that in the tail of this bomb, in the explosive end of this bomb; it was an antipersonnel bomb, 100 pounds, and it said, "We are the manufacturers of this bomb. We know that it was going to be used to kill troops, so we took the explosives out of it and then manufactured it, put it together." And that's the bomb that dropped in his lap. Had it been any explosives, well of course, both he and his jeep and everything else would have been blasted.

He came to England and was in the same hospital that I was at … Oxford General Hospital. So we struck up a conversation. I didn't know who he was. He said his name was Dick Woods, so I shook hands with him and we got to know each other very well.

His father came to Wisconsin, the capitol to give a talk about the war. His father was the ambassador. Oh lord, lord, not Beaver Brook but – isn't that awful, that's awful. I don't remember, you know. But anyway, he gave a speech. And when I heard that his son was with him, I went to the public relations department of the hospital. It was a great big service hospital and asked them to do something about it; that this fellow would be a fine person to come out and give a talk, too. They called him up and sure enough he would be happy to come out.

So in this foyer, which was about as large as our foyer, we were all circled around there ready for his imminent thing. I was about here and the rest of the guys were around in kind of a horseshoe shape. He walked in and he saw me, and he said, "Jim!" and he walked toward me. One of the fellows, a lieutenant, got up from his seat and offered it to him to sit down. He was about six-foot-six.

He had neither leg, but he had what he called a "stout pole." And it was made of oak and he would put that between his legs and he would maneuver himself so that he stood up. Put one end with a rubber tip on the floor and then pull himself up. And I thought it was magic that he had so much strength that he could do that. And then he would walk, that's the way he walked, throw one foot up with the help of this kind of a cane to steady himself ... remarkable man. The things that we said to each other, he said, "I never want to see this kind of murder again."

UNK: Did your military service define some of your life after that?

JG: Well I went in as a boy; I was 21, but I was still a boy. When I came out, I was considerably more mature. I had some goals that I wanted to do and that established my life.

I had a remarkable thing happen to me. I was at the Oxford General Hospital and I'd heard so much about Oxford University that I assumed that it was like NDSU, all one operation. Well come to find out about it, Oxford is I don't know how many colleges make it up. There's no relationship of one to another, except that they live on the same plot of land, very beautifully landscaped. And these colleges are kind on the side of this little creek that runs through there, very, very beautiful. This lieutenant commander who happened to be in charge of the hospital; one day I asked for permission to go see him and I was all in a complete casted body. This arm was up in the air and this leg was way out like that; and I asked permission to go into the Oxford University. And the guy looked at me and he said, "Do you know," he said, "I've been here three years and you're the first one that ever wanted to go there. Let me see what I can do."

So that was on a Wednesday or Thursday and on a Sunday, he came in and he said, "Sergeant, I have you all set up. You're going to Magdeburg." We call it Magdelene College, they call it Magdalen College. "And you are enrolled in the College of [unclear] in Economics" that's as close as I can get it to it now, "in the College of Economics." I said, "I didn't want to get enrolled. All I wanted to do is see it." "You are enrolled. Good luck." And he said, "I tell you what I'd like to have you do. Get a couple of other guys to go with you because they'd enjoy it, too." And so I got a hold of a couple of guys that could walk, and together we went there. And just as soon as we got there, these [unclear] grabbed a hold of me and put me in a wheelchair and wheeled me all over and sat me at a desk for lectures. I stayed there for

about a month. And I'd like to have kept in touch with those young boys, I guess, that took care of me.

UNK: How long were you in the hospital at Oxford?

JG: About five or six months.

UNK: What an opportunity to go to the university.

JG: Yes, that was. Today is different than it was in those days. Today, everything is chrome and steel and glass and beautiful oak or light wood in our universities. NDSU, I know; I don't know much about MS, but I was at Concordia, and I know these things are true; very modernistic.

They're not modernistic. They had desks that were about four inches thick and, of course, everybody carved their name on them from King Richard to – and they never changed them. They just kept them out there and they're full of ink stains. In the old days, they used to have inkwells and pens, you know, and a lot of ink stains on there. You could tell where they had sanded them in the off-season but there was a lot of damage done to them, which I thought it was kind of nice.

UNK: When you were discharged what was your rank then?

JG: Tech sergeant, five-striper.

UNK: And is that designed by the length of time that you were there or what you've done?

JG: By what I was doing, yes. We were just automatically. Once we graduated from our school we were given four stripes and then you earned the fifth stripe.

UNK: What did you do after leaving the military and did you use any of your economic studies?

JG: Yes, I came home and I was an engineering student. In my last year in high school and the first year, the only year I spent in junior college, I studied for engineering. So I loaded with math that was basically it. And so now here I am studying economics and I figured as long as I've gotten this far and lost – I could have gone back into engineering, real easy, but I decided not to.

People who were injured like me were allowed to go on a Public Law 16. I did not go on the G. I. Bill. And the only difference between 346 and 16 was that you had to determine where you're going, what's your goal, and once you established that's it. And once you achieve it, that's the end of it; 346, whenever you get so far and you want to expand, you want to go for a master's degree and you have the time left go; but not this one.

I went to my advisor and said, "I've had enough law now so that it's taken pretty well care of the first year. I would like to go on into law school." And I said, "Is it possible with Public Law 16 [unclear]. And he said, "I think we can do this. Let me try it." He said, "I have to run it through the Veterans Administration, and I'll have to run it through the administration at University of Minnesota." He said, "Give me, give me 90 days, I think we can work." So 30 days before this deadline, I went in to see him. "Have you accomplished anything yet?" "No," he said, "I haven't," but he said, "I will." He said, "I've made some approaches." So I came back on the appointed week and he had died.

So that was the end of the ball game for me as far as my education was concerned. I accepted a job in Fargo as an assistant manager of a ladies ready-to-wear store. It was very boring and I was not happy with it at all. They had two parts to the store, the basement and the upper and I ran the basement and the shoe department. Have you lived here for quite a while? Well, Buttrey's.

UNK: Sure, I know, Buttrey's.

JG: I don't know how long I worked there, but I think it was about nine months. I resigned and I already had a job with Procter and Gamble. I had called a friend of mine who worked with Procter and Gamble and he talked to his boss. His boss came into Buttrey's store, and they had just had a resignation there. Would I like to go to work, because I had shown some interest in the interviews in the college. So I did for the next 35 years … through three jobs, three promotions.

UNK: One more question about your military. Can you remember your worst military meal?

JG: Yes, I can. I was down in the desert in Tunis and we didn't get very much to eat. We got K-rations. You probably know what K-rations are. A little box and it's got a hard hunk of chocolate in there and it's got a little tin of some kind of vegetable – well it's usually hash, or sausage meat or something like that, and then a couple of crackers. That and your water that you carried in your canteen was supposed to be the total.

Then we go to where they had a tent out there in the middle of the desert. And it wasn't a tent; it was just a bunch of canvas that the guys had found and strung up. They had driftwood that they'd gotten on the beach. And they had made some kind of a platform and they had these Army stoves – great big, huge stoves which had been dropped there – and that's what they cooked on. All we got there was hash and as some people say this meatloaf or Spam, you know, and that was it – and not very much Spam, just a little bit.

Everybody was tired of the food, just tired. And the word went around the base, and the base is very loose, that they were going to have meat that night.

And oh, you should see the line; everybody was lined up to get that meat. And luckily I was in the forefront, probably about 10 people back, and they started serving this and, sure enough, we had this meat and I want to tell you, it sure did smell good. And somebody came in and said, "Who killed the blank, blank camel?" That was the end of it. I went over there and just dumped my mess kit upside down and left the premises. That was my worst meal.

UNK: I can believe that. Can you tell me how you'd like to be remembered?

JG: I think, probably, that I was a hard worker and I was honest and a good father and good husband. I don't want to be remembered as a good soldier.

UNK: Thank you. Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

JG: No, I think we've . . .