A Veterans Oral History

Heritage Education Commission
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Moorhead, MN

Richard Smith
Narrator

Stephanie Manesis
Interviewer

May 20, 2012
Fargo, ND

SM: It is April 20, 2012. This is Stephanie Manesis, and I am interviewing Mr. Richard Mansfield Smith in Fargo, North Dakota. All right, Mr. Smith, could you tell me a little bit about where you were born and your family that you grew up in?

RS: **I was born in Leeds, North Dakota. I grew up, at least 'til first grade, in North Dakota. I went to first and second grade in Moorhead, Minnesota. My father bought a country elevator in Doran, Minnesota, which is just south of Breckenridge. I lived there until my junior year in Breckenridge High School.**

My mother insisted that I commute back and forth to school because she thought I should have a little bit better education than the one-room schoolhouse, where they had the high school and three grades in three rooms. When I graduated from high school, my mother enrolled me at the University of Notre Dame. I made that work for two-and-a-half years. I wanted to fly. I knew I was a prime candidate for the military. So a friend of mine and I enlisted at Fort Wayne, Indiana. And in due time, I was called up to join the Cadet Corps. I made that work. I graduated in February 1943 and, at that point, got in pretty active military. Do you want more about my life in Doran?

SM: If you could tell me the day and year that you were born and tell me what year you graduated from high school, please.

RS: **I was born September 8, 1921, and I graduated from Breckenridge High School in 1939.**

SM: So tell me did you have brothers and sisters and, if so, how many?

RS: **I had a half-brother who was eight years older than I am, so he wasn't around very much. My mother sent him away to school. It was her son. And I had a sister eight years younger. So I was probably raised more like an only child.**

SM: And you said you graduated in which year 19 . . .

RS: Thirty-nine.

SM: Thirty-nine. So when you were in high school, did you have any thoughts about what you wanted to do when you grew older?

RS: I didn't have any thoughts. I just knew I was going to have something to do with the elevator business because I liked to hang around in the elevator. I worked the harvest fields. I used to cooper up boxcars, which you don't know anything about. I worked very hard for my father but I never got paid. And the day I left Breckenridge on the Empire Builder to go to South Bend, my dad was at the train to say goodbye and he gave me a book of blank checks. Do you know what blank checks are?

When I was growing up, you could get a book of blank checks on, say, the Farmers of Merchant State Bank. And then you could write in there who you wanted to pay, and how much, and write out how much, and sign your name. And in my case, I would sign my father's name on the bottom. Not much paperwork in those days. And as I was getting on the train, he gave me the book of blank checks and he said, "Don't abuse the privilege." So away I went.

SM: So tell me about the boxcars. What did you do with the boxcars?

RS: Well before they had the tank cars that you see, hundreds of them now in a string, we had wooden boxcars that had sliding doors on both sides. And the railroad furnished us, what we called grain doors. They were made out of rough lumber, and they were about seven feet long. And we would throw those in the car, get in there, and nail them up on the inside, put some paper in the cracks, and crawl out, and put the grain spigot in there. And if we could put 2,000 bushels of grain in a boxcar in those days, we were doing really well. The tankers now, you can put 4,000 bushels in them. And you don't have to do anything other than make sure the hole in the bottom is closed.

SM: So it's much easier now?

RS: On the other hand, to compete in the grain business today, you have to be able to load 250 cars of grain in 24 hours. So as you drive through the country, you see a lot of great big steel tanks in some small towns. And then they take them from small towns to a bigger town, where they have maybe a sub-terminal. Because a lot of elevators do not have the capacity to load 25 4,000-bushel-capacity tank cars.

SM: So you knew then at an early age that you wanted to follow in your father's footsteps.

RS: I did.

SM: Did you talk to your dad about it, at all?

RS: **No.**

SM: It was just a given?

RS: **I was in the service before the war in Europe was over. Because of my World War II experience, I got out early to go to work for Eastern Airlines. I was in New York City when they took gasoline rationing off. It took me about five minutes to decide I didn't want to live in New York City. So I went down to the operations office for Eastern and had a visit with a nice man. We parted company and before I left, I called my dad and said, "I'm not happy in New York, I'm going to quit flying. Do I have a job when I get home?" And he said, "Yes."**

SM: You said your mother registered you at Notre Dame?

RS: **Yes.**

SM: Did she talk to you about what school she wanted you to go to or how was this decision made?

RS: **My mother was – my dad was a good man; but he had no religion. On the other hand, all the time I was gone in the underground, he went to church every day. So when it came time to go away to school, my mother decided I needed to go to a Catholic school; and so I went to Notre Dame.**

SM: And did she choose Notre Dame for you or . . .

RS: **She knew I wanted to go. I followed Notre Dame football when I was a kid. Yes.**

SM: Was that a difficult school to get into then, like it is now?

RS: **Evidently not, because I had no science and no foreign language, and I can remember the priest say to my mother, "You know your son will have to make up these courses to graduate." And she said, "Oh, that'll be no problem."**

SM: He was saying that you would have to make them up at Notre Dame to graduate.

RS: **Yes.**

SM: Tell me about your Notre Dame experience.

RS: **I was a dumb farm kid mixed in with a lot of young men who had been to some good Catholic parochial schools. As I look back on it now, if I would have applied myself, I could have done really well. But I was away from home; and so you always try to**

find some outs. We had to be in bed by 10:00 o'clock. We had to get up and go to mass every morning, or you didn't get to stay out until 10:30 on a Saturday night.

SM: Did you go to church very much, growing up as a child?

RS: No.

SM: Not at all.

RS: Well, no. I commuted. I was a big in high school because I had a car. Wasn't every kid that had a car then. In fact, I was the only kid in high school that had a car. And so my mother made arrangements with the local priest in Breckenridge that when I got done with football practice or basketball practice or baseball or track, or something, I would stop and he would inform me of the niceties of the Catholic Church so that I could become confirmed.

SM: So in Notre Dame you went to mass every morning. What did you study at Notre Dame?

RS: I'm ashamed to tell you that the priest told my mother that I should be in economics and philosophy, and I should have been in business.

SM: But you were in economics and philosophy?

RS: I was.

SM: Did you like it?

RS: Not particularly. It was a lot of philosophy courses that the average person doesn't ever hear about that I didn't find very interesting, and nobody did either except the priests or the instructor. The economics part I liked but I should have been in business and then got the economics on the side.

SM: Did you realize that much later when you had your own business, or in school did you know you were in the wrong major?

RS: After I was out of school and was married and looked around and said I don't really find much use of philosophy dealing with farm clientele.

SM: Why did you decide to leave the university and enlist in the military?

RS: Oh, I was a prime candidate. I knew I was going to have to go.

SM: Why were you a prime candidate?

RS: I was about 6'1"-6'1½"; 175-180 pounds. I had all my fingers and toes. My head, obviously, was working pretty well. And I had always wanted to fly, and I didn't really want them give me a rifle and start walking through the mud.

SM: So you wanted to be able to have some control over your destiny by enlisting?

RS: As much as I could.

SM: Did you enlist in the Air Force or where did you enlist?

RS: There was no Air Force then.

SM: There was no Air Force then?

RS: **It was the United States Army Air Corps.**

SM: Army Air Corps; that's right. So was there an enlistment office in the town where Notre Dame was?

RS: No, we hitchhiked about 90 miles away to Fort Wayne, Indiana.

SM: Who did you hitchhike with?

RS: One of my classmates.

SM: Tell me about what happened after you went to the Army Air Corps and enlisted.

RS: They sent me home and said, "You'll get orders." I got orders to go down to Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas, and they started making a soldier and a gentleman out of me.

SM: How long were you in boot camp for?

RS: I'd say 12 weeks.

SM: And then what kind of training did they send you to?

RS: T**hen I went to primary training in Sikeston, Missouri, and learned to fly.**

SM: How long was that?

RS: That also was 12 weeks.

SM: Any memorable experiences from your flight training?

RS: My instructor let me solo before he should have.

SM: Tell me more.

RS: **Not much to say. He just said to me one day, he said, "Mr. Smith, would you like to go by yourself," and I said, "Yeah." So he said, "Fly around the pattern and land, taxi back, and talk to me. If everything's going good, you'll do that three times." And when we were taxiing back up to the ramp, he said to me, "How much time do you have, Mr. Smith?" I said, "Just a little bit over seven hours." "God," he said, "Don't tell anybody. They'll take my job away from me. I'm not supposed to solo anybody until they've got eight hours or more."**

SM: Do you think that decision was based on the fact that he thought you had a lot of potential?

RS: **Well, I think that he decided I could fly.**

SM: Tell me about the first time you were out on your own flying.

RS: **We had some guys that when they got up there they couldn't go around in the pattern. They'd see that empty hole up there where the instructor was supposed to be and they'd fly and fly around until they ran out of gas and then they'd try and land and crash land. To me, I was very confident that I could fly. I did what he told me to do and . . .**

SM: Okay.

RS: **I didn't have any problem.**

SM: Then what happened after Sikeston?

RS: **Enid, Oklahoma, for basic.**

SM: Okay.

RS: **Bigger airplane, bigger engine.**

SM: Tell me more about that.

RS: **About the same kind of stuff, shoot landings, fly a little cross-country, fly some at night. Be nice to your instructor so he didn't wash you out. I had a really good instructor there. He would get ahold of me every once in a while and he'd say, "Mr. Smith, let's you and I go check the weather." And we go up and fly in the cumulus clouds – it's really fun. And so that period of time went by. Then I went to advanced flying school – twin engine – Pampa, Texas. We were the first group in there so we spent some time with razor blades taking the painting off from the windows. Pampa, Texas, not too much there.**

SM: What was it like?

RS: It was just a little old cow town up in north Texas.

SM: How long were you in Pampa, Texas?

RS: Twelve weeks.

SM: Twelve weeks … so this was your fourth session?

RS: Third.

SM: Your third of 12 weeks?

RS: Primary, basic, and advanced. And then I got my second lieutenant's bars and my silver wings. And then I was sent to Boise, Idaho. How much do you really want here?

SM: You tell me whatever you want, Mr. Smith.

RS: You don't want any of my personal life do you?

SM: If you have some fun story about your personal life in the military and you want to share it, I'd love to hear it. If you fell in love with a woman in Boise, I want to know, because I want to know if you were communicating with her overseas.

RS: There was a young lady that I had dated from my second or third day in high school through college, and through the junior prom at Notre Dame. She wanted to get married. And somehow or another she got to Pampa, Texas, during wartime. And she wanted to get married. And I would say, "Why do we want to get married? The first thing that's going to happen, I'm going to be shipped overseas; and you're going to have a little bundle of joy that may be crying all the time, 'pitched from pillar to post'." She was after me and after me; and I finally said, "Ah, hell. When I get to my first duty station," which eventually was Boise, I said, "I'll find out how much trouble it is to get married and I'll be in touch." Well I was in Boise two weeks and I got a "Dear John" letter from my girlfriend, telling me she had just married another young military man in Denver, Colorado. And I was madder than hell for about 15 minutes; and then I finally said to myself, "What the hell, you're free. You're on your own. You have no encumbrances."

There were a lot of available females at every Army Corps flying field. There was something about a pair of wings that the girls liked. And you knew you weren't going to be there very long and they knew you weren't going to be there very long.

I was in Boise, Idaho, and one day I went down to the duty board and found out I was going to fly that night. So I went down, and there was an instructor pilot in the

right seat and a so-called pilot in the left seat. And we started in and the young man that was the pilot was not having a very good night. And on his third landing and go-around, the instructor pilot said to me, "Mister, have you ever flown this airplane?" And I said, "No sir. It's the first time I've been in one." "Well," he said, "Get in the seat. It can't be any worse than it is."

I got really lucky. I shot three, nice, square patterns and nice landing. We were on our way up to the ramp because our time was over. And he looked at me and he says, "They've got the wrong man flying this airplane." And from that minute on, I had my own crew. That's as much instruction as I got in flying a B-17.

SM: Tell me a little bit more. He said, "We've got the wrong man flying this airplane," – that was the other pilot or no? What do you mean?

RS: He said I should be flying the airplane, not the other guy.

SM: So he switched . . .

RS: Well, I never saw the other guy again.

SM: Okay.

RS: I don't know what they did. They may have moved him to another base to make him a copilot or what, I don't know.

You found friends and you lost friends, just like this in the service. Some of them were in crashes. Some of them got transferred. There were no longstanding friendships.

SM: How did you deal with that?

RS: Oh, I just went where they told me to go and did what they told me to do.

There was one thing that really ticked me off, however. The day we were told if we were caught flying formation that we would get washed out. And nobody, at that point, wanted to get washed out. We were all gung-ho. So two other guys and I decided on Fourth of July to fly some formation. And we went down over Coeur d'Alene Lake, kind of low, and blew over a few sailboats and kept on going and then we all spread out. When I got to my duty station in England, and had come back from my first mission, the squadron commander said to me, "Lieutenant, you don't fly very good formation." Well, he's a major. I'm a second lieutenant. There's no way I'm going to make an excuse. So I didn't get off on a very good start there. I eventually caught up and found out how it was supposed to go.

Then we just traveled around western United States from one Army Air Corps base to another; and eventually we wound up at Grand Island, Nebraska. They gave us a

brand new B-17 and told us to get ready to go overseas. Get your shots. So one morning, they sent us off to Bangor, Maine, to Goose Bay, Labrador, over to Reykjavik, down into Prestwick. We were so damn smart that we had stowed all of our oxygen gear on the bottom. We took all of our gear with us in the airplane, in the bomb bay. We were on instruments all the way. So very uneventful.

SM: You were up in Maine and from Maine where did you go?

RS: Goose Bay, Labrador.

SM: Okay, Goose Bay, Labrador. How long were you in Labrador?

RS: Just overnight to fill up with gas. Get something to eat. When we stopped at Reykjavik, there was a GI in a jeep. He says, "I'll give you $100 for every bottle of whiskey you've got onboard." We were so damn dumb we didn't have one. We didn't take a camera with us.

SM: This is Reykjavik in Green Island – or Greenland?

RS: No, Iceland.

SM: I knew it was Greenland or Iceland. How long were you in Iceland … Overnight?

RS: Overnight

SM: Just overnight and then what happened?

RS: We flew to Prestwick, Scotland. Then they took the airplane away from us. I stood across the street from the Johnny Walker Distillery and paid $20 for a bottle of Johnny Walker Scotch whiskey. We didn't think that was very nice of them, but . . . Then they put us on the train and we went down south of London. We were there for a few days and one of my enlisted me came and said, "Hey boss. They're breaking up the crew. They're sending us all over." I said, "Okay."

So I went down to the master sergeant. I said, "Have you got a typewriter?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Have you got some order forms that are blank?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Can I use your typewriter and will you give me a few forms." He said, "What're you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to send my crew to the 95th Bomb Group." He said, "You can't do that." And I said to him, "Do you care where we go?" "Hell, no I don't care." I said, "Give me the paper and give me the typewriter." So we all wound up at the 95th. I signed the thing on the bottom. There's a lot of funny things you could do during the war, because nobody really did give a damn.

SM: Tell me more what you mean by that.

RS: Well just like that. Nobody checked to see who had signed the orders. Who had moved Dick Smith one place and Al Boer (sp?) another? Nobody looked.

SM: There was not . . .

RS: All they looked up at the top. Lieutenant Richard M. Smith, 0672007, report on or before . . . Horham, England.

SM: So you basically determined where your group went to?

RS: Not basically, I did determine.

SM: You did determine and nobody was the wiser?

RS: Nobody ever said a word.

SM: That's kind of strange.

RS: A lot of strange things happened in the war.

SM: Was there just not the level of accountability, they weren't keeping track of things very well?

RS: Everybody was too busy. They'd look at the top to see that Lieutenant William Boer was where he was supposed to be. They never looked at the bottom, who signed the order.

SM: So why did you want to go to the 95th Squadron?

RS: That's where I was sent. I didn't know the 95th from the 100th or the 303 or whatever. That was just where they were sending me. And so I made the determination that's where I was going to send the rest of the crew.

SM: Then where were you sent for the 95th Squadron?

RS: Horham, England it was a crossroads out in East Anglia. Do you know England?

SM: I've only been to London before.

RS: Well south of London there's quite a big flat area called East Anglia. And that's where all of the bomber bases were. You could look down anytime and see four or five runways. At Horham there was a church and an ancient house and the 95th Bomb Group.

SM: When you say ancient house, what do you mean by that?

RS: Old, old house.

SM: Okay.

RS: Yes, maybe back from the 1500s.

SM: How long were you based out of Horham?

RS: Until I got shot down.

SM: Tell about the different missions you were on.

RS: The first mission we went on was to Bremen. We were tooling along and it was a beautiful day. Not a cloud in the sky. And all of a sudden I could see this great big thunderhead up in front of us. I said to my copilot – he and I got along really well. We became fast friends … long after the war. And I said, "For god's sakes, Bill," I said, "There's a great big thunderhead here and there's not another thing in the sky." We kept going along, and all of a sudden I saw a big red flash, and I thought "holy, we're going to have to fly through that crap," which we did. I went to Bremen three times. I went to Norway once over the North Sea. I went up to the free city of Danzig once, Haringsburg (sp?).

SM: Where was Bremen?

RS: Bremen was a major, major seaport on the North Sea. There was a couple of other trips in between. The sad part of it really was they'd get us up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning, give us breakfast, take us to briefing. Tell us where we were going to go and how we were going to get there. Get in the airplane. Take off with a full bomb load and a full gas load; get up to altitude 28, 29, 30,000 feet. Get a message over the radio. The mission has been scrubbed. So there we were. They'd gone to all the effort, and takeoffs, a lot of times, were just as bad as flying through the flack. I mean the airplane was overloaded, if you lose an engine on takeoff that's the end of the road.

SM: How often did you see that happen to other guys?

RS: Twice … I was waiting my turn. If you don't have the whole runway, they won't let you go. In those days, we fed from two lines coming in. And so this guy would go; and then this guy on this edge of the runway, 30 seconds later he'd go; then 30 seconds later, I'd go. So there was a minute for the "prop wash" to dissipate a little bit. I'm waiting to pull in line and the guy from the other side pulled in, in front of me. He was out of place. He'd missed something and was trying to make up. He got off down the end of the runway, and he racked his airplane up to try to catch up, and it stalled. Hell, there wasn't enough left to put in the back end of a pickup. We flew low and slow when we finally got off the ground.

SM: Because there was so much weight on the airplane?

RS: **No, because I wanted to build up some air speed. I wanted to get my [unclear] turn back before I started my procedure turn and climb. We would climb on a prescribed route, triangular at 500 feet a minute, in total overcast. Have you ever been sitting in an airplane and all of a sudden you hear it go "un, un?" You know you just missed somebody by about five seconds. You just went through his prop wash.**

SM: Seriously?

RS: **Seriously … that wakes you up, too.**

SM: So prop wash means kind of the wind coming off of his airplane?

RS: **Wind coming off from the engines, off the propellers – the prop wash – propeller wash.**

SM: So how did it feel to be flying, when you were flying?

RS: **Most of the time, I guess I should say it's hard work. We flew tight formation. My copilot and I decided I'd fly for 20 minutes, then he'd fly for 20 minutes. And I'd fly for 20 minutes and he'd fly for 20 minutes. Then on the way home, the formation was spread out a little bit and then you didn't have to be quite so precise. But if you were where there was any chance of German fighters, you had to stay tucked up real tight or they'd come through the formation and kind of disrupt it.**

SM: How many missions had you flown to France before you got shot down?

RS: **To France … just one.**

SM: The one you got shot down in?

RS: **No, that was Ludwigshafen. We got shot down. We lost an engine over Ludwigshafen, couldn't stay up with the group. We got into France, north of Paris. Got jumped by some German fighters and then took them maybe five minutes to shoot the airplane down.**

SM: To shoot your airplane down and where were you over?

RS: **North of Paris, 50 miles about.**

SM: Tell me what happened when you got shot down.

RS: **Well the airplane, basically, became unflyable. You know what the stick is on an airplane? That's the thing that goes back and forth like this to make you go up and**

down. Well the airplane was shot up in the tail so it wanted to keep climbing and I had both feet up on the stick to hold it up. It wasn't easy for the guys in the back to get out the back door in their parachutes. Three of them were hit pretty hard and the ball turret gunner was hit. The copilot and myself were the last two out.

SM: So the other four guys got hit in the airplane?

RS: Yes.

SM: They were killed.

RS: No, no, no. One of them landed in shock and a French surgeon just happened to come along and he took a look at the guy – the Germans did not give the French any kind of medicine. He put a slit in the guy and took out a kidney, sewed him back up and then they hauled him off to the hospital. My little guy over there, he just died a couple of days ago. He got shot up pretty bad ... was in the same hospital. There was a German orderly sentry; and everyday he'd come to see Tony and he say, "Tony, your friend isn't going to make it." Then he'd go up to Bob Adams and he'd say, "Bob, your friend isn't going to make it today." They all did eventually make it.

SM: Mr. Smith, so you're saying all of the guys of your crew bailed out alive?

RS: **Oh, yes.**

SM: They all bailed out alive and where did you land?

RS: I landed in a little town about 25 miles north of Saint-Just. It was township or county or whatever they call it in France.

SM: Did you land in a field or where did you land?

RS: Oh yes, I landed in a field where there was an old Frenchman plowing with a team of oxen and a wooden plow. I landed right close to him and I took off my flying boots. I took off my white Mae West vest. You know what a Mae West vest is? That's a vest that you wear and you can pull a couple of strings here and it inflates. It will keep you afloat. Then I was down to my flying suit, under which I had a A-2 leather jacket. As I recall, I think the old guy was scared spitless. And he pointed one way, he said, "allemand." He pointed the other way and he said, "comrade" and he pointed up toward some woods. Well I didn't know what "allemand" meant at that time. It's French for "German," but I knew "comrade" so I took off in a dead run for up in the tree.

SM: Without your boots on?

RS: I had my regular oxfords on. And they fit tight enough so that when I hit the straps in the parachute, the boots didn't come off and the shoes didn't come off. A lot of guys when they bailed out, they had electric suits and so they didn't have any shoes. All they had was flying boots but when they bailed out with just flying boots, they flipped right off. Fortunately I didn't have to go through that.

SM: So you had boots over your shoes?

RS: Yes, big heavy sheepskin-lined over boots.

SM: You took off your vest and then you went running towards...

RS: I laid my parachute down in the furrow, indicated for the Frenchman to plow it under. Five days later I was in a house. A couple of young girls came in and were pointing to their dress. Somebody in their family had retrieved the parachute, taken it apart, dyed it, and made skirts out of it for them. Material was very, very scarce for any of the occupied. Even Germany didn't have anything.

I went in the woods quite a long ways. It was a pretty big forest; and I did a right turn and I went quite a ways. Then I kind of doubled back, come to the edge of the woods again, to see what I could see from a secluded spot. I was listening. I could hear motorcycles, so I knew that the Germans were looking for us.

In the pre-war years the French had no fences. They had hedgerows that divided up their fields. So I went back into the woods, and I kept going away from where I had landed to where I thought I was past the hedgerow. So I cautiously left the woods into the hedgerow. And I was walking along the far side of the hedgerow and I saw a nice little opening there where, obviously, some animals – deer or something – had made a nest. And so I said to myself, "Well, I'll just sit here and wait." If somebody had seen me, finds me, here I am. If not, I'll wait until deep dark. During the afternoon I could hear trains down in front of me. And I thought, well when it gets really, really dark I'll head down that way and I'll catch the first train, whichever way it's going. One of the things – I was an early evader, really. I was 336 and there were eventually 2,000. So I was kind of a pathfinder, my crew was pathfinders.

SM: What do you mean you were pathfinder of what?

RS: Of escape. Of what to do, what not to do. And I guess the simplest thing I did was I did what they told me to do. And so I'm sitting here, and I'm about ready to get out and start going toward the little village to catch a train. And three young men showed up, each had a 45 automatic, and one of them had a sack over his shoulder. Well he dumped the sack; and I became a Frenchman right there. I never saw my GI clothes again. The clothes they gave me were lousy, so I was lousy for over a month going through. I've often felt sorry for the people that put me up, because I

must have left their beds with whatever I had. I could feel them crawling them around on me.

Oh, yes. They walked me down to the little town to the gendarme's office, and I could hear them deciding my fate in French. There was a bounty for every airman that the French would turn in. So you know I was apprehensive.

The first thing I know, they put me in the trunk of a little tiny – you know how little the French cars were? They stuffed me in the trunk of one of those cars, and I was in there for, I don't know, a half-hour or forty-five minutes. And then they opened up the door and I got out, and they led me into a farmhouse, and there was my radio operator and my copilot. The first thing – one of the young men could speak a little English, and he told us in fractured English that half the house was pro-German and half the house we were in was pro-Allies or pro-French. So be very quiet.

They were sitting around and I saw they had, well a liter, I guess, of some brown liquid and the guy said to me, you know, "Would you like a drink?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." So he gave me a glass and he started to pour. I can still remember he had a kind of a funny look on his face because I didn't want to make a pig out of myself, but I wanted quite a bit, and I had the glass about half full. I took a drink of that stuff. I couldn't talk for half an hour. It was a 190-proof Calvados … my first experience with Calvados.

Anyway we had to be very quiet. Slept on the floor, the next morning they fed us. They fed us again a little bit at noon. And then at deep dusk, they put the three of us in another car and took us down into a good-sized town; put us into an abandoned house that had no plumbing, had beds but no plumbing. Told us not to go outside and don't stand in front of the windows. By this time, a man by the name of Captain Jacques had got involved; and he could speak pretty good English. He was the leader of that section of the underground, of the resistance. Every day a really good-looking young girl, probably 19 or 20, would come with breakfast or dinner – supper. And every day – my radio operator was Italian, so he could do a little bit of French or Italian-French or something – and so we would get to talking to her.

And one day after she had been coming maybe about 10 days, she came and she was kind of crying and my radio operator, "What's the matter?" She says, "I can't come to see you anymore." He said, "Why not. What have we done?" She said, "My husband" – who was Captain Jacques and he was a good 40 years older than she was – "says I'm spending too much time here, so he won't let me come here anymore."

So then we were on kind of thin rations for a while. Then pretty soon a man came and said, "If you've got anything, pick it up because you're moving." So we moved into a little one-bedroom house, kind of on the outskirts of town where there was a husband and a wife and a brand new baby. And that lady could cook.

She had a rabbit hutch in the backyard. We ate a lot of "lapin" stew. That's French for rabbit. In years to come, I would kid the little girl, who now is 20-25 years old, I'd kid her about when she was brand new, I'd change her shorts for her.

Then we took turns, they wouldn't sleep in the bed, so we took turns sleeping on the bed … two in the bed and one on the floor. We'd keep rotating. And our host and hostess and the little baby, would go out back in the barn and sleep in the hay. He worked at the paint factory.

One time in 1969, my wife brought Paul and Yvonne over to the States to Orlando to one of our reunions and showed them a very nice time.

Another morning we'd been probably two weeks in the Saint-Just area. Said, "Well today you're going to Paris." So here comes a great big, old Daimler-Benz. I thought, "Where in the hell did they find that thing, and how do they have enough gas to make it go?" But anyway, he took us into Paris and he couldn't find where we were supposed to go. He finally stopped and made a telephone call, found out where we were supposed to go. He dropped us off in a little tiny apartment with an English lady who had stayed two days too long in France and was interned – and we had tea. And she said, "I suppose you gentleman can figure out that I just can't keep four of you here." And we said, "Well, yeah, pretty tight."

SM: This is the English lady?

RS: Yes.

SM: In Paris.

RS: In Paris. So she made a telephone call, and in about a half an hour, she said, "You go out the door and turn right and we were right by the Arc of Triomphe, maybe two blocks away." And she said, "You look kitty-corner across the street and you'll see a man there with a newspaper rolled up in his side pocket of his coat, and you follow him. You stay on one side of the road and he'll stay on the other. So we're walking down the Champs-Elysees, bumping shoulders with the German soldiers and their friendly girlfriends.

And pretty soon we saw him cross the street and go through a door. So we went right through the door, also, and we were in the Canadian-Pacific Railroad building. We were on the fifth floor, my radio operator and I. The ball turret gunner couldn't walk very good. The copilot was still a little [unclear], so stayed with the English lady. Al and I went downtown across the street from the Grand Hotel and down from the l'Opéra House. We were having supper that night…came a rap on the door.

SM: Now, I'm sorry. You went into the Canadian-Pacific building, and then what happened from there?

RS: We were taken up on the fifth floor.

SM: And then where did you go?

RS: Came back down to the living quarters. They had – the people we were staying with had living quarters on the first floor.

SM: Of the Canadian-Pacific Railway. This is like a new family now, that you're going to stay from the English woman's house?

RS: Oh yes. You never exchanged names. The only reason I know the Beggs, is Yvonne said to me, you write your name and address in the United States. And if we live through this, we'll contact you. Nobody would give us their names or where they lived. So anyway, we're down around a nice table.

SM: Now what I don't understand is – were you having dinner on the main floor of this building or you went out for dinner?

RS: Oh, no, never went out.

SM: So you're having dinner on the main floor of the Canadian-Pacific building where this couple lives.

RS: There was a rap on the door and in walked a German soldier. Fortunately, neither Al nor myself paid any attention. I mean we didn't turn and look at him or anything. We didn't see. He had real coffee beans that he was bringing to have our madam – she had a coffee grinder and she'd grind coffee beans for his three officers on the third floor. He came every other night. And he finally asked who we were; and we were relatives from the south, in Paris for a few days' vacation.

We ate and drank there very, very well. This lady was getting money from the underground, from the resistance; and twice a week she would go out in the country. We had real butter. We had real cheese. We had good meat. We had white bread. Wine was plentiful and maybe something else.

Then one of them, either the man or the woman, must have been part Jewish or something, because after the first night, every night we had Jewish people for dinner. They had the Star of David on and they ate very well with us. And there was a lot of chatter. It was very lighthearted. One day one of the ladies, Jewish ladies, I think had one glass too much wine. The German soldier showed up and she started giving – you could tell by the tone that she was giving him a hard time about something. And I said to myself, "What the hell is she doing? Let him get his coffee beans ground and get out of here." No, she was after him. So after he'd gone for a while, I asked the mister of the house "Monsieur," I said, "What's that all about." Well he said she was telling him that when the American airmen came, they were

going to put the run on the Germans and run them right back to Germany. And he was telling her he could care less; he'd sooner be home anyway.

SM: But he didn't know she was Jewish?

RS: Oh, yeah, she had a big Star of David on. Oh, everybody did.

SM: But how in the world, were they there in front of Germans being Jewish and not be shipped off.

RS: Oh, just hadn't been their turn yet. You see the Germans didn't ship all the Jews out. They just shipped out the ones that they couldn't use – for something other. The one of them might have been a laboratory technician that the Germans had needed her to work to do something. No, they didn't send all the Jews. They sent almost all of them, but any of the Jews that could help them, they left them.

SM: So, he said he would just as soon be home so he didn't care.

RS: Yes.

SM: And he never realized that you guys looked different than the French?

RS: By this time we had different clothes; and so we were just tourists that had come up. Even as bad as it was, you could make arrangements to take a train if you dared to get on the train. Even then there was no fighter escort for us, but there were low-level sorties of pea-shooters shooting up trains. And so it was always hit and miss. You might get a train that went through just fine. You might get one that was blown up.

SM: And who were blowing up the trains?

RS: Not me, I have friends that did – stayed with the French underground and went out with them to do sabotage work, but not me and not my radio operator, and not the other two either.

Then one morning a delightful young lady came. She shook me and she said, "Mr. Smith, you're going today. Get dressed." So while I was getting dressed, she was trying to talk my radio operator into staying on and operating the radio for the resistance. And he said, "No, no thanks." She took me on the subway, down to the train station, then I got some papers. I never got any money but I got some papers. I had a discharge from the French Army. I had papers that allowed me to get up into the coastal area. I was a geologist up on the coastal area that checked the footings and the foundations for the defense that the Germans were putting up. I had papers to go to work in Germany for six months.

SM: And what was your name?

RS: I don't remember.

SM: So they gave you French papers?

RS: We had a flood in Breckenridge one weekend and all my high school, college and military stuff went to the dump. So we don't talk about that very much.

Anyway I rode the train and, just like our trains, they had MPs on them. So every time the MPs would come down the aisle, you just reach in your pocket and hold up your papers. Look out of the corner of your eye and when they get done with them and they get ready to hand them back, put your hand up there and take the papers and put them back in your pocket. The guy said, "I hope you can tell French upside down or right side up, because you're going to get a newspaper." I was under strict orders not to talk to anybody or not to do anything or take anything. I was offered wine. I was offered bread and cheese. I was offered bread and sausage.

SM: And you just shook your head no?

RS: I didn't do anything, I was a deaf mute.

SM: So you were on the train from Paris going up to where?

RS: Saint-Brieuc…all day long.

SM: That's up on the Normandy coast?

RS: Yes in the Brest peninsula. Then I got in on a little narrow-gauge train.

SM: Now wait a minute, was your radio operator with you as well?

RS: No, no, he came the next day.

SM: So you're by yourself?

RS: Yes.

SM: How are you feeling on the train?

RS: Well I suppose the simplest thing to say I was lonesome. You know. It's difficult to sit and sit and sit and not saying anything or do anything or go anywhere or, you know, whatever.

SM: I would think that it would be terrifying also?

RS: I guess my approach was if they catch me, they catch me. If they don't, they don't. The thing that really bothered us is Captain Jacques back at Saint-Just, he had taken our dog tags, so I was with nothing to prove that I was an American soldier.

SM: So what were you most worried about might happen?

RS: If I got caught, intense interrogation, because they'd want to know who helped me. That's why nobody would give you their name. We had to know where we were in Paris. And there were no summary courts there. If a Frenchman or a French family was caught helping an American airman, they shot the whole works. They didn't pay any attention, there was no hearing. They just took them out in the backyard and shot them and left them there for their neighbors to bury. It was not nice.

So then I got on a little narrow-gauge train. And I'd been told in Paris that at some point, a young lady with a knee-length leather coat and knee-length rubber boots will walk down the aisle of the train. You get up and follow her. Five other guys got up. None of us knew each other. So we followed her to her home.

SM: Now this is at the end of the train line?

RS: Oh, no, the narrow gauge went on. It was just a stop that we made at a little town called Plouha, which is just a little ways from the coast. The German work trains went back and forth every day. And we were going to be there at a maximum of three days. Either we were gone with a British gunboat or we were going to start walking to the Pyrenees.

SM: So you got up and five other guys got up at the same time? Were you terrified when you saw that or you were okay?

RS: I was very surprised. Now I had a black felt hat and a long black coat. And when we got to this lady's house where we were all somewhat relaxed and laughing, they all thought that I was a Gestapo agent, walking around the square looking for them. So they were, as it turned out, more apprehensive than I was.

SM: So you followed her to her house? How old was this woman?

RS: Eighteen, nineteen.

SM: Young.

RS: Yes.

SM: It was her parents' house that she took you to?

RS: Her mother's.

SM: It was just her and her mother in the house?

RS: Yes.

SM: Then what happened?

RS: We slept on the floor. You know, I can't remember being up there, what we had to eat. It couldn't have been very much – probably some bread and milk or something. I don't know. It was on the third day that we finally got word that the British were coming for us. Otherwise, we'd been walking.

SM: To the Pyrenees?

RS: Yes.

SM: And then what would have happened, if you walked to the Pyrenees?

RS: Well, hopefully, you'd get a hold of a Basque guide. The biggest escape route was across the Pyrenees. The train from Paris down to . . .

SM: Toulouse?

RS: No, Toulouse is in the wrong way. That's that's east of the Pyrenees.

SM: To Perpignan, you went down to Perpignan?

RS: That sounds kind of familiar.

SM: Perpignan is down by . . .

RS: There were two or three jumping-off places. But I didn't have to do that. The British came in with their rowboats. They had a lot of clothes, a lot of medicine, but no money. The Allies were paying 15,000 real French francs for every evader that they got out and back to England. And so they sent the boats back without any evaders in them to get some money to bring them back.

That's how I wound up with an oar helping get the boat back to the mother ship as quick as possible. They had it figured out so close that they did not use hemp ropes for the anchor. It was hair ropes. So it just would take one snap of the hatchet – would cut the rope and they'd be loose. There was a German gun – the bay it was like this; we were here – the German gun emplacement up here.

SM: German what?

RS: **Gun emplacement.**

SM: Okay.

RS: So they had to proceed – they would only come three days during the month. I don't know whether you know it or not, but there's only three days in the month that the moon never comes up. So they wouldn't come if there was even a sliver of the moon.

SM: So you're saying that when the boat came the first time, they didn't have any money to pay, so they had to go back to the ship?

RS: To get the money.

SM: And you had to wait on the shore?

RS: We did.

SM: How far was this young, 18-year-old woman's and her mother's house from the coast?

RS: Two and half miles.

SM: And did you walk from the house to the coast?

RS: **Oh, yes, they took us through barnyards and pigsties and anything to – the Germans patrolled with dogs – anything to kill any kind of a scent on the trip.**

SM: So you were walking through people's properties who had given them permission to have you walk through or who knows?

RS: Who knows, I don't think anybody asked for permission.

SM: So they would walk through barns, and they walked through pigsties and stuff so that you would pick up animal scent to throw off the dogs?

RS: Yes.

SM: And this was at night?

RS: Oh, yes.

SM: So you left the house, at what time at night did you leave the house, approximately?

RS: Well it's now February first or second.

SM: Of 1944?

RS: Forty – yeah. I would imagine that the nights were long, and the days were short, so we may have left this lady's house at 8:30-9:00 o'clock to walk down to the beach. We walked down a very steep cliff, very steep.

SM: And was the radio operator with you?

RS: Yes, at this point he was and so was the ball turret gunner. And we were helping him because he was ambulatory but not really good.

SM: What was wrong with him?

RS: Well, he gotten shot up.

SM: Okay.

RS: So we got on the ship. We got some hot bean soup. The boat started going back to England. Out of the 25 people that they picked up, there were only two of us that didn't get sick. That was my copilot and myself. And if you can imagine three bunks in a tier with a wash tub going back and forth, as the ship was going up and down. You're sick to your stomach and you're trying to hit the wash tub going by. A lot of times you didn't make it.

SM: So a lot of you were throwing up the whole trip?

RS: Yes.

SM: All over the place?

RS: Yes.

SM: And there were 25 men that they picked up off the shore?

RS: Yes.

SM: Just in that one point or in other parts along the coast?

RS: No, just at Plouha.

SM: Just Plouha, how do you spell Plouha?

RS: P-l-o-u-g-h-a.

SM: P-o-l-u-g-h-a. So five of them came from this woman's house where you were?

RS: Well they had them stashed all over.

SM: And were they all Americans or were some of the Brits.

RS: No, there was one Russian. One Russian tank commander and one German resistance worker that had escaped from a concentration camp. Then there was a young man from Rhodesia that I got to talk to … really nice.

When I was in Paris, my guide took Al and I into the German officers' quarters. He said, "If you see anything here you want, just pick it up. They got so much crap here, they don't know what they want to do." So I picked up a big, black and white Meerschaum pipe for my dad. And I carried that damn thing with me all the way through until they took us off the boat in England to feed us. Then they put us in British Army uniforms and some dirty SOB stole my pipe.

SM: Did you have it back in your bunk or where was it?

RS: At this point I still had my big black coat. And by this time we got off of the boat to get onto a train. And I left it on the train to go get something to eat and then get different clothes.

So in a few days, I'm back to the 95th; a few days I'm back in the U.S.; a few days I'm flying guns.

SM: So they put you back into the Army Air Corps?

RS: I was never out of it.

SM: So in other words, after you got, you go back to England, you came back to the United States and they did not allow you to go home?

RS: They would not allow us to go back on any enemy operations for fear if we get shot down again; the Germans would find out how we got out the first time. So you couldn't go back again.

SM: So where did they put you?

RS: I'd been at the repo depot in Atlantic City, New Jersey; and there was really nothing wrong with me. So I went down to the first sergeant and I said, "Where are you sending guys like me today?" He said, "We're sending you to Texas." I said, "You know, I don't feel very good. I can't sleep. I'm having bad dreams." "Oh," he said, "That's nothing." We'll send you down to Lake Lure, North Carolina for a couple of weeks." There was nothing wrong with me. I just didn't want to go to Texas. So I got back to Atlantic City, and I went down to see the man. I said, "Where are you sending people like me today?" He said, "Fort Myers, Florida." I said, "Okay, I'm ready to go." You can beat the system if you tried.

SM: You could?

RS: Yes. Well what else do you want to know?

SM: I have a few . . .

RS: Oh, it's early.

SM: I have a few questions for you. You got out of France in February of 1944?

RS: Yes.

SM: What day in February did you leave France?

RS: I don't know.

SM: And what day did you get shot down?

RS: December 30, 1943 …forty-three was a big year for me. I graduated from flying school. I became an officer and a gentleman. I got a "Dear John" letter. I learned to fly B-17s. I flew a B-17, almost always on instruments to England. I made a few missions. I got shot down on December 30th… forty-three was a big year.

SM: Wow, it was. So you were in the underground for about a month and a handful of days?

RS: Yes.

SM: What was your most strong impression the whole time? What surprised you the most, or struck you the most?

RS: I guess I would have to say the thing that I was most happy with, is what the French would do for us. The worst day I ever had was the day that I had to give up my dog tags. Because from then on, I was really vulnerable.

SM: And Captain Jacques was the one that took your dog tags?

RS: Yes. I've been back a few times to see them all. But I've been back to see his wife a couple of times, too. And she doesn't know what happened to them.

SM: What was your rank when you left the military?

RS: Oh, that's an interesting story, too. When I got back out to Horham – when a crew got shot down, everybody kind of divided up their stuff. I mean, like I lost all my underwear, all my dress uniforms, shoes; enlisted men, the same way. Then there was an honor code, that if you got back, you just posted your name on the bulletin board, and said, "Lieutenant Smith is back. I'd like my stuff back." And then, to the best of my knowledge, the only thing I ever lost is one guy took – I had a nice chronograph that my parents had given me.

SM: I'm sorry, a what?

RS: A chronograph wristwatch. He had traded me a Bulova Perpetual, but it didn't have a real good band on it. That's another story.

But anyway the commanding officer heard, obviously, that I was back; and he sent word for me to come to his office. He would like to talk to me. So we talked a while; and he said – and I told him what had happened right up until the time that I bailed out. And then he said, "Well, Lieutenant, what happened to you when you hit the ground?" I said, "Well, I'm very sorry, but I took a pledge for fifty years, I would not tell anybody what happened to me on the ground." "Oh," he says, "You can tell me." I said, "I'm sorry, but they told me I couldn't tell anybody."

SM: And this is the pledge that you made to the French Resistance?

RS: Yes to the French Resistance but through the American Intelligence. See I got debriefed. We all got debriefed when we got back. "What did you do? Who did you see? Where did you go?" So the American Intelligence knew exactly where I'd been and what I had done and who had helped me. But I couldn't tell anybody else.

SM: So the American Intelligence knew who was helping you?

RS: Yes, because our intelligence could also help the French in some ways or other. So anyway, he kind of shifted around and I got the idea that I was supposed to leave. And he says, "Well, Lieutenant, is there anything I can do for you while you're still here? Because," he said, "I know you're only going to be here for a few days." I looked at him, I kind of smiled and I said, "Well, you could promote me to a captain."

If you flew five missions, you immediately became a first lieutenant. So I'm a first lieutenant and I said, "You could promote me to a captain, because once I get back to the U. S., there'll be no promotion." He looked at me and kind of smiled. He said, "Well it's been very interesting visiting with you. Thank you for taking the time to come and see me." I said, "Well it's been my pleasure. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more, but that's the way it is." So I'm in Breckenridge, Minnesota, in early March and I get an envelope in the mail.

SM: In nineteen-forty-four?

RS: Nineteen-forty-four … I'd been promoted to captain. So I went from being a second lieutenant to a first lieutenant to a captain in a year and about two months. And I go around to some of these military bases now and talk to these guys that have been four and five and six years waiting to get a promotion. I said, "Well do you want me to make you feel bad?" "Oh sure what's the matter?" I said, "There's nothing the matter with me, but I can make you feel real bad, if you want me." "Ah, go ahead." They'd sit there and shake their head. You can beat the system.

SM: So you think that happened a lot in World War II?

RS: I don't think it ever happened. I don't think anybody would have intestinal fortitude enough to go up to their commanding – this man is a full colonel and he's in charge of the whole airbase. And he's brand new. That's why he wanted to talk to me. He was brand new to England. My guess would be that there was never another evader that ran into a brand new group commander. And if there was, he wouldn't have intestinal fortitude enough to ask to be promoted. So I was pretty big.

SM: You're smiling.

RS: Well, I am, didn't happen to a lot of people.

SM: Probably did not.

RS: I never would have been promoted to captain if I'd a stayed stateside. My poor, old copilot, he went all through the military, four-and-half some years, as a second lieutenant. C'est la guerre.