

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

CLIFFORD W. BOWERS

P-51 Mustang pilot, USAF, World War II/Korean War

1994

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Bowers, Clifford W. Oral History Interview, 1994.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (62 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: sound cassette (62 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Bowers, a Monfort, Wis. native, discusses his service as a P-51 pilot with the United States Air Force in World War II, and stateside service during the Korean War. Bowers relates volunteering in order to control his service position, basic training at Wichita Falls (Kansas), and flight training at Cimarron Field (Oklahoma). Stationed at Wattisham, England, Bowers describes life at the base including recreation activities and parties, typical missions as a bomber escort, hatred of Germans, and contact with English civilians. He relates information about air-to-air combat, air-to-ground strafing, dogfighting techniques, death in the air, positive and negative pilot personalities, and the V1 and V2 rocket war. He evaluates both German air defenses and German pilots; as well as American airplanes and equipment. He talks about his home-coming, joining the Reserves, and using the GI Bill. Bowers briefly discusses his Korean War service protecting the Northern section of the United States from a Russian attack.

Biographical Sketch

Bowers (b. February 18, 1923) served with the Air Force in the European Theater of World War II, and served stateside during the Korean War.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, n.d.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller 2001-2002.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Mark: On this data sheet here, it says you born in 1923, in Monfort--

Clifford: Monfort, yes, M-O-N-T-F-O-R-T.

Mark: Grant County. Could you perhaps describe some of your years before you went into the service, like how was your upbringing during the depression for example?

Clifford: Well, I was born and raised on a farm for my first eighteen years, and like you mentioned the depression made a person a little bit more concerned about what the food was going to be on the table and what have you that way. That is one of the reason I used to do a lot of hunting with my brother; rabbits, squirrels, pheasants and so on. But after World War II, I never shot a gun again. You know the rabbits and squirrels can't fight back.

Mark: But Germans do.

Clifford: But there is a little difference. So, that's why I don't believe anymore. Well, I know you want me to go back further.

Mark: No, that's okay.

Clifford: That was fine; growing up on the farm, of course, as everyone did, so many did anyway, getting things organized. Then I went to Platteville College to Teachers College for two years before I went into the service in 19--I signed up in November 1942. So from there on is--

Mark: You were how old when you signed up?

Clifford: It was, 42, let's see 1923, I was 19.

Mark: And you volunteered?

Clifford: Yes, sir.

Mark: Out of what sort of motivation?

Clifford: Well, I think it might be kind of like your family. If someone has done something wrong to your family you're going to rebel in one way or another and the word patriotism is something that is used, but I think if you go back to the Civil War, my God, they even had the people buy the others for 100 bucks, you go in my place. So who's patriotic? I think it's more just the family, which the whole United States is your family. So you sign up,

but you also sign up so that you can get where you want to go. I wanted to fly. And if you wait until the draft,(why, I guess the draft only passed by one vote, as I remember), but if you waited for the draft you could be sent any place.

Mark: So, this was a way for you to have some control over what you were going to do in this Army?

Clifford: Yeah, you think you have control, you know? At least I am going into the Air Force and not the Navy, I am going into the Army by the way. I used to kid my neighbor, he was a naval flier and of course I was Army, that if they really wanted something done, where it was a very dangerous mission, they would get ten sailors or one American Air Force, one that had a big hangover, you get the same job done.

Mark: So, you signed up in November 1942. And did you have any--like, what were the terms of your contract? You said you wanted to go into Army Air Corps, is that what you actually signed up to do?

Clifford: Sure. The outlets where you take your physical and mental and they take you right in from there. I went right from signing up, they gave, I don't know, thirty days or something, and then I got on a transport train, here in Madison and go to Wichita Falls, Texas, to start my first thirty beautiful days of basic training.

Mark: This was your Air Force Basic Training. Was it still Sheppard Field then?

Clifford: That's exactly what it was.

Mark: I was there too.

Clifford: You could have some snow, and then you'd have dust flying in your face, I remember some of those days.

Mark: And what was Air Force training like?

Clifford: Well--

Mark: What did they do? March you around?

Clifford: That first thirty days is a dandy, because you're on 26 mile hikes. Wichita Falls, you know, isn't too far from Oklahoma, so you go up there and back. They are supposed to bring you food at midnight, but they never do. But, anyway, a lot of K.P. A person learns how to handle pots and pans. So, that's the first part of the training, but the rest of it is so,

well, progressive and good. Classification, where they make the decision whether you're going to be a pilot, a navigator, a bombardier, or out (washed out). And "Pre-flight," which is ground school of all of your navigation, engines and aircraft recognition. Which they would throw pictures of aircraft on a screen at 125th of a second so you had to recognize them, which is very important. Then you leave pre-flight and go to "Primary", which is flying PT-19 Fairchild, open cockpits--

Mark: Was this also at Sheppard?

Clifford: Nope, that's now in Oklahoma, at Cimarron Field, Near Oklahoma City. After you finish there, I think about 65 hours with many tests and studies, then finally an Army Captain gives you a final test. Then, you go to basic training, which is Garden City, Kansas, BT-13, the old Vultee Vibrator. Then after that you go to Victoria Field at, no, Aloe Field at Victoria, Texas, for AT-6's the North American. The Navy called it the SNJ. That's where you graduate; you finally get your wings.

Mark: When you first started a Shepard all the way to this last step, there were wash-outs all around?

Clifford: Oh, indeed.

Mark: About how many would you say?

Clifford: I'd say about 25-30%, besides that, many, many killed. Crashed or couldn't handle it. So, after that you get a seven day pass, the only one I ever had, I came home. Then I go back and am flying P-40's.

Mark: Where did you go?

Clifford: That's to Madagora Island in the Gulf of Mexico. The P-40 has an Allison engine (that's the same plane the Flying Tigers flew) and would over heat very quickly especially with the temperatures like they were. So, you had to make sure once you got the engine started you had to keep going and get airborne. Let's see, after that, Madagora, we went to Dale Mabry Field, in Tallahassee, Florida, for just a short period, but then on to Harrisneck, Georgia, where we flew P-40's with aerial gunnery, ground gunnery and dive-bombing, skip bombing off the Atlantic coast.

Mark: That's an awful long training; they're moving you around quite often.

Clifford: Yes.

Mark: In retrospect, did you think your training was adequate? Did it prepare you as well as

training, perhaps, ever could?

Clifford: Yeah, I think they did a great job. They could have maybe shortened it, because I kid about it, I was so damned good I didn't need all of that. But they could of shortened each phase of flying and got me overseas sooner than they did.

Mark: Because you got overseas, what year then?

Clifford: July `44.

Mark: And you signed up in November 1942 and with 30 days delay, then traveling between assignments. That's fourteen months of training.

Clifford: Yeah. So that part I didn't think was the greatest. The only other thing I wasn't trained for was on my first mission we were escorting bomber's, B-24's and 17's, was that nobody ever told me about the lead bomber drops streamers, and I thought "What in the hell are those things?" Well it was of course where the next bombers could come up to that same white streamer and drop bombs without the bombardiers redefining where the target was. I turned around on that mission a lot of flak and it's the only time I ever had the--my body told me something was wrong, because we were on our way back and both my feet started to shake, so I guess the nerves did catch up that time, but never again.

Mark: On your very first mission.

Clifford: Yeah.

Mark: This was over what city.

Clifford: This was Mersburg.

Mark: I don't know where Mersburg is, I spent two and a half years in Germany but I don't know Mersburg.

Clifford: Oh well, anyway that's where it was. I'd have to dig it out myself as to where it is. So, from then on, why, it was one fun game after another. I belonged to the 479th Fighter Group, we were the 434 Squadron, there were three squadrons on the base--

Mark: Based in Wiltesham?

Clifford: No, it's Wattisham.

Mark: Wattisham.

Clifford: It's just a little bit west of Ipswich. I have the book at home, out of all of these, 30% of the fighter pilots of this group, were lost. And that's through flak, that's through weather, which was the worst it could possibly be, and, being shot down. So, about 60 people, anyway.

Mark: That's quite the funeral. About how often did you fly missions? Did you fly daily; did you fly every other day? Or--

Clifford: Well, it had to be pretty much every other day, except for weather there were a few times that I flew two missions a day. I flew 54 missions--over 310 hours with seven victories. The longest I ever flew was 7 hours and 31 minutes.

Mark: That's a long time.

Clifford: That same day I flew the second mission, which I didn't get back until after dark. So I got a little over twelve hours in that day. When you sit in a single seat plane for that long, it gets your bottom a little tired. I think I explained to you the lack of bathrooms.

Mark: Yes, it's mentioned very descriptively in--it's quite interesting. So, could you perhaps describe some of the missions you were on? Like a typical one.

Clifford: Well, a typical, see they (the bombers) would take off anywhere from 2:00 in the morning; it would be 24's or 17's. Every mission was certainly a different experience, but they'd take off and start forming up over England, and we wouldn't take off until three or four hours later, and we'd catch up to them in an hour. One I think that will always be a remembrance, is flying and coming up through this horrible fog that goes up to 20 thousand or more feet and leading a flight up through the middle of this box of 24's and your peripheral vision picks up the shadows. It's a good thing we didn't come up underneath them where you'd crash right into them. Out of your side looking vision, here's these gray shapes, which kind of give you prickly skin.

Mark: Sure.

Clifford: Then going on from there the bombers would always have, and of course your briefing would show you where they are going to go, but, many up over the North Sea and down through Denmark in that direction, but always changing a course, this whole big batch of bombers, so that the Germans didn't really know where they were going. They finally settled down and would have to stay on this final IP and that's where they really got it. A lot of flak before and a lot of fighters. But, during the thing the fighters were not there, they didn't want to get shot at, of course (the German fighters). Then the flack just became black, and of course sometimes you'd see red balls, and that's the ones that hadn't gotten near you yet. I never got a scratch on an airplane through training or anything else.

I had a second mission, on one night coming back, I tried to make a Navy Landing, I guess, and I blew out a tail wheel.

Mark: What do you mean by a “Navy Landing?”

Clifford: Well, they land with their tail hook so [laughs].

Mark: I see.

Clifford: So anyway that blew out, and it kind of swerves you around a little bit with the old tail draggers, they were all tail draggers in those days, except P-38's. I know on missions B-24's usually drop their bombs from 22 to 24 thousand along in there some place. The B-17's about a thousand to two thousand feet higher than the 24's. But the one day I remember pretty well, and they were always getting hit real bad, you could see bombers going down and you'd try to keep your eyes in the back of your head to see if any German fighters were coming, but you're trying to count parachutes see what you can bring back for the G2 to interrogate from you. This one time these B-24's just went into, they didn't warn us about that one, we didn't know what in the heck was going on, they started on a long glide, and by God, we ended up at 4 to 5 thousand feet! Then they dropped their bombs. The Germans must have been completely confused, because the flak was going off way up at 20 thousand feet, they timed it for that, now the 24's get down to 5,000, drop their bombs and get the hell out of there. That day we didn't lose a bomber or a fighter. So, those are kind of interesting things.

Mark: So, you did almost exclusively bomber escort.

Clifford: Well, always, but the thing that would happen, is that after you would bring them back to the English coast, someplace in there, why you could turn around and all fly in and strafe whether it was trains, bridges, munitions, or flack towers, anything that moved, many times I shot horses. I did have seven German planes destroyed.

Mark: Germans used a lot of horses for transportation.

Clifford: Yeah, and toward the end of the war they were running out of petrol, and I had a brother that was in field artillery at Aachen in the Battle of the Bulge. You know they said it was your own discretion whether you shoot these horses or not. I'd always make a pass over whoever the one that was pulling it and get them to jump and run, then I'd come back and lift the horses right across the field. But at least they couldn't move the damn artillery and petrol. When I first got overseas, of course green as grass, and you're always a wingman at that time. I flew with one fellow who was already on his second tour. He was a killer a heart. I remember he shot down a FW-190. See, the dogfights could be over with in one minute, they may last two minutes, but by-God they're over with. Everybody scurrying and

flying in the clouds and anything else to get away, the Germans would. But this fellow when he shot down the FW-190 started circling the parachute, when it got down to 1500 to 1000 feet he flew right under it, and his prop wash caused this parachute to collapse and the German hit the ground like a ton of bricks. His reasoning was you'd better kill the S.O.B. because he would be up here tomorrow and you might not make it. But, that same time, to show how his thoughts were, there was a farmer in the field right near where the fellow landed and he was shaking his pitch fork at him, at us, and hell, he just made a circle around and lifted him out of the patch. Of course, he had the great reasoning there that he could raise a son that might have to fight mine some day, so he had all the reasons in the world.

Mark: I get the impression talking to you that this was a somewhat unusual attitude?

Clifford: It was. See, if you think back of World War I, all the saluting and all the, whatever you call it, that you've won so now go on down in flames. This fellow didn't have that attitude at all. On New Years Day, I shot down a ME-109, but it went from 30,000 feet to the deck, up by Hanover and I always thought I was a damned good shot, but I just couldn't hit him. Finally, down about 100 feet I start hitting and finally got him, but I am right next to the damn city. I think to myself right then and there 'Get the hell out of here.' because all the rifles, everything that could shoot, and if they would happen to get you, in a P-51 it was liquid cooled Rolls Royce Merlin engine and the coolant lines went from the engine all the way back underneath you to the radiator. If you get one rifle thing it'll chill you off. Well, I could just imagine being picked up by the Germans and what they'd do to you.

Mark: Right, now, didn't you hear stories--shot down, what would happen to you? If you got shot down and landed in enemy territory?

Clifford: Well, fortunately, those that I have talked to and made it back because of P.W. they were treated half way decent. One fellow I went overseas with, I went all the way through training with him as a matter of fact, was coming across at the Bulge time, just after the Battle of the Bulge, chasing a FW-190, our own artillery shot him down. The German got passed but they shot down my good friend. But he was so low, the training you had in the 51 was that you pull up, roll it over on its back, pop the canopy off, put your foot on the stick, and push the stick forward as hard as you can, so which throws you out with centrifugal force. So, with one sweep of the 'chute he hit the ground, but he was in American territory, so he was back ready to fly again two days later.

Mark: Now, having grown up in Wisconsin there is a lot of people with German ancestry and things like that here, I'm wondering about your thoughts and impression about fighting against the Germans. I mean Bowers seems to be a German name.

Clifford: It is. My great-grandfather was born in Wittenberg, Germany.

Mark: Oh, is that right.

Clifford: You know, I mentioned this in the first part, when somebody does something to your family you're going to rebel. I'm glad I went to the European theatre because at least in England I could talk to somebody. But, as far as the Germans are concerned, we didn't know a damned thing about the Buchenwald and all the other things until the war was just about over. But the hatred for them was intense, the only thing that was different, if I had gone to the other theatre Japanese I could tell who they were. But as far as the Germans they look the same as we do, so I don't know the answer to that, just that we had the motto, that you cause the other fellow to make a mistake and then you kill him for doing it. That's why training, you mentioned training before, training never got over with, with my roommate and myself, every time we weren't on a mission we'd go up over western England and dogfight between ourselves and come back wringing wet with sweat, just because it wasn't in our, my best interest to lose out to a German.

Mark: Just out of curiosity, what was the farthest into Germany that you have ever gone?

Clifford: The farthest I ever went was the Oder River, which is just to the East of Berlin. Which doesn't seem like much on a map, but it's just amazing to me how one doggone country like Germany felt they could take over the world. I've also thought much about it, I was just talking to my neighbor, just yesterday, what would this world have ended up being if we'd have lost to the Japanese and to the Germans? Would we have a complete Japanese military army sitting here or the Germans sitting here? What do you think? What would it of been like?

Mark: Probably not good.

Clifford: No, I don't think so.

Mark: Let's move on to some more personal type things. I wonder if you could describe some of your fellow pilots and how you all got along. Where you all came from, that sort of thing.

Clifford: Well, they certainly came from all over the United States. But, every time you moved you didn't have the same pilots with you anymore, primary to basic to advance.

Mark: So it's a constant shifting--

Clifford: Shifting of different people, so, they can say with all the camaraderie, yes we were brothers, but, they were just like everybody in business. Like you, you do your job perfectly but another person in the same thing does a lousy job. That's what happened

with pilots, they got through the training, but as far as being able to dogfight and everything else I could whip them into two turns, they were lousy, but we got together enough, I said if you could figure out how to shoot me down I want you to tell me how, but in the mean time I want you to learn how to do it from me. So, they all become quite proficient. One of the fellows that was a Lieutenant when I got there, Robin Olds, became a General finally, and he went through the Korean situation as I did, and he also went through Vietnam until he became the Commandant of Cadets. So at reunion time I see all of these characters, not those during the training period I don't see them anymore, but those from overseas Squadron 434 we do get together about every, (as a matter of fact it's going to be this October) about every two years. It used to be every five. But each story gets better every year. You know, if I had to do everything over again, leave everyone else at home, I would have won the war single handedly, you know that.

Mark: Did you have much contact with the British people?

Clifford: Yeah, quite a bit. We used to--shouldn't mention it, but once in a while we'd trade a blanket for a dozen eggs.

Mark: Well, I was going to ask you about the Black Market things, but perhaps you could just go on--

Clifford: Well, you know, we never had any milk, we didn't have any eggs, it isn't that you can't live without them but, I felt I lived a lot better with them. So, that's what you would do is take some of the little things that you didn't need, you know summer it's hot, you didn't need the blanket. I'm sure the people back home were just tickled to death to pay their taxes to buy another blanket. So, as far as getting along with them it was fun, they were nice. Some of our people, well for example, one fellow flying a 51, his engine quit on take-off. He had about four swastikas on it, but he went right through the chicken coop of an Englishman, and it killed the Englishman. Well, his sad sense of humor was to paint a teapot on the side of the plane. So that doesn't go over very well.

Mark: I suspect not.

Clifford: But, anyway, getting along with them, we'd go down to a pub in London. I remember one time, we were way on the outskirts of London, we threw darts and had warm beer. Another fellow and I went in there and at least an 80 year old woman was sitting at the bar right near me, after a few minutes I said to her, 'Does your mother know you're out?' English, their sense of humor, is not exactly swift, so you could hear, [chuckle], they build it [laugh] up and pretty soon they get the joke. So we got along with them fine. See sometimes coming back from missions you'd get in this damn fog. Instead of finding my way back to my own place, I landed at a place called Woodbridge, at Christmas Day as a matter of fact, 1944. Woodbridge was a huge massive runway that you could land and

take-off about three times in the same direction it was that big, you could almost do the same thing sideways, but it was all controlled by the British. The British men, they didn't think that highly of us I don't think, because the expression that everybody's used a thousand times, 'You're overpaid, you're oversexed, you're over here.' and the Americans had their billfolds full of pound notes, these guys were getting a pound a week maybe or less. So they didn't treat you very good when you'd stay there overnight. They could hardly find you a cot to sleep on. The ones that treated you the best were the U.S. bomber crews, because they would beg you, 'Don't leave us any sooner than you do', and you would hook on to one of the B-24's or 17's and land with them let them do the navigating through the whole thing. They would take very good care of you, food and beer.

Mark: I don't want to get too personal, but there is a lot of talk about war brides and that sort of thing. I wonder if you could make any comments on male/female relationships with the British. Was there a lot of that sort of thing? Because, I don't know if you have seen "Memphis Belle"--

Clifford: Yes.

Mark: --and the guy, the young man brings the lady into the cockpit of the airplane or something, and I was speaking to a gentleman who was a bomber pilot, he says 'We never did anything like that.' I was wondering if you had some comments on that?

Clifford: Well, we had parties as often as we possibly could but it was usually when the weather was so bad, we'd take the big trucks into Ipswich and just holler, 'There's a party at Wattisham. Some how out of the shadows came women from all over the place, and they'd go back to our base and of course they loved it because they had a chance to get some good food, free beer and whatever they want, plus I was a virgin, so I didn't know what else was going on. A lot of them did. They had the expression, I think I told you about this before, but, in the states you always had a party on a Saturday night and the women would come by bus at 5:00 and had to get on the bus a 12:00 to go home. Midnight. But the joke over at our base was that the women couldn't be on the base before Thursday and they had to off the base Wednesday of the next week. So, I'm sure some took advantage of it.

Mark: Yeah.

Clifford: But, there were a lot of pretty girls.

Mark: Did you know anyone who eventually married one?

Clifford: Yes.

Mark: More than one? Was this fairly common?

Clifford: Well, I know of two. One lives in Alexandria, Virginia and I see him and his war bride every reunion. I don't know how often they get back to England, but he had stayed in the service after WW II and then got stationed back in England again. So that's how he met her the second time around.

Mark: I'm going to skip around on this questionnaire. While we are on the social history type of subjects, other than parties, how did you guys occupy your free time?

Clifford: Well, like I told you before the majority of time that I did was getting out there and keep going with other members of the squadron to better myself, but also better them. Sports was always mostly volleyball, what else, I don't know what else, sports, what the hell we did do.

Mark: Card playing?

Clifford: Yeah, a lot of them played poker into all hours of the night. A few of us played hearts, of all things, a female game I guess but at least there wasn't any money involved, like what was being thrown around with the others.

Mark: Let's go back to some more military history type of things. The Germans you fought against, how would you characterize the German air defenses, and the fighter pilots? Were they formidable adversary?

Clifford: Well, I think you've seen all of the things that I have through the years, but what was noticeable to me...see so many of these had already been in the Spanish War, my God, the training they had there shooting down recruits. Some of them had 275 victories.

Mark: Pilots you mean?

Clifford: Yeah. That many victories, shooting against one of them, that I found out about shot down 5 training planes on the same circle while the kids were trying to come into land. But they had so damned much experience before, even when Lindberg was talking about all the things that they were doing. Glider pilots, but hell they weren't just gliders, they put engines on them. They were practicing long before Poland, I'll tell you that. So, they were fantastically experienced and they knew how to get their back to the sun and they knew how to... see one maneuver I learned from them, which, when you come head on at somebody, the majority of everybody always turns left. That's because of the torque of the airplane, it takes you in that direction, but as they turn left the thing that you do is do a complete high-barrel roll to the right. So they're going left and you're going right and that means you can swoop right in behind them. If you turn the same way he did, now you're

in a damn circle going around and around. So that one I learned from them. I couldn't figure out how in the hell he got in that position. But then I figured it out, so. It's a tricky one but it's a fast one.

Mark: Did it take a heavy toll in your comrades?

Clifford: We have, I have the list at home of the years, now some of them got there before D-Day, and I didn't, I didn't get there until a month after, but there were 26, let's see, 26 fighter pilots I believe per squadron but with rotation of some going home and some being killed and what, we lost about 44 pilots. Six in one day. So there was nobody playing ping-pong that day. But that's where I think a person gets so indoctrinated to death that you get back home, here, and death is so easy, life is so difficult. You know.

Mark: I guess...I have never been a combat pilot. Air defenses, the flak, do you think this was effective?

Clifford: Oh, yes. Before I got there the B-17's and 24's couldn't have any escort very far or very deep because of the lack of fuel on P-47's, P-38's and Spitfires--And hell, we've lost as many as fifty B-17's on one mission.

Mark: Yeah, there's the Swinefurt Raid--

Clifford: You bet. So, I know, they were deadly. The B-17's were supposedly the great fortress but I've seen so much captured German film, ME109's, ME110's, 210's and the Focke-Wolfe, hell their pictures would be right up their fanny. Maybe you've seen them too. Then shooting the B-17's down. Absolutely, when there's no fighters to protect the bomber, I think one of the things, you mention earlier about training, the bomber gunners I wonder how much they were taught about lead. How far ahead do you lead a target? Now, if they are aiming right at it they are going to miss it, of course they are. But, it just seems to me that they didn't. God, these Germans could come right up along side of them, right in the back of them and they couldn't hit them. So yes, their defenses were fantastic and this flak is something. I lost my electrical system twice and if your flying an element on the right side, for example, of the flight the two that are on the right are looking left. The ones on the left are looking right and the guy that leads he doesn't have to look any place. He's trying to find the target. With the electrical system out, here's flak starting to heat up on the right and those guys on the left take off. Well, hell, I couldn't hear anything because the radios off, everything shut off to save the battery. That's another thing as far as you get some victories and a lot of them that had many victories. Hell, they were in the war before you were even a cadet. So, who gets to lead? I'm not saying it derogatory, but all they do is do the shooting and you don't get to shoot at all. You have to guard them. It's no wonder they have so many victories and the rest of them sit around on their 'pub!'
[laughs]

Mark: To use the English term. Did you see any of these German high-tech weapons; I'm thinking, for example, jet fighters, which came in the very end of the war?

Clifford: You bet.

Mark: How frequently because it's not something that you normally see.

Clifford: No. Matter fact, Robin Olds, I was talking about earlier, was leading a flight one time and I was flying his element, which is his lead on the second side, and about 25 thousand feet, four ME262's came at us at about 11:00 level. Robin Olds said to us, "Hold on to your drop tanks until I tell you," well you got the switch on, he's says "Okay drop them," so you push the button to drop them and you turn into them so that they doesn't have any tail shot at you. I went into a damn spin because my drop tanks didn't drop. So, that was the last I saw anybody that whole mission. But to get back to them, yes, I saw them, and I saw them many times but I saw them at such distances and such speed that there was no darn way that I could ever get close to them.

Mark: There were pretty--

Clifford: Well, at least 150mph, I'd say faster than we were.

Mark: And you went how fast?

Clifford: Well, the top speed we had was 440.

Mark: So they were well over 500mph?

Clifford: Oh, yeah. Then the other thing that we used to see was the V1 and the V2 bombs. The rumble of the V1. We had four hangars and it took out the two middle ones. When they stop making the noise they are on their way down. The V2 was so damn huge, I remember being on several missions where I'd see them take off out of Holland, and you'd see this long white steam and look way up in front of it and see this huge monster, going up into the stratosphere, and you'd come back and you'd pinpoint where you saw it from. You'd tell G2 when you got back where it was, so then the English would go over and strafe and bomb that particular position to try to get rid of them. They were the Block Busters that took out a whole city block in London in one shot.

Mark: Yeah, they were pretty feared in Britain weren't they?

Clifford: You bet.

- Mark: In your memoir you describe an incident where you were shot down in Belgium?
- Clifford: I didn't get shot down, I ran out of gas. So I landed at Leige, Belgium and a bunch of the farmers, which I couldn't speak their language but they understood and we siphoned gasoline out of crashed up trucks, cars and tractors I don't know what octane it was but the thing surely smoked on takeoff to go home.
- Mark: This was behind German lines at the time.
- Clifford: Nope. It was the--
- Mark: It was American--
- Clifford: The Americans had already taken over. So that's why I was able to get out of there in such good ease. The other one I mentioned to you was after the Battle of the Bulge was just starting to let up. This same character that was so happy to shoot people he said, 'Bowers come on let's go' so we took off and he was sitting right above the English Channel just off the waves and I had to stack up from him and my head is in and out from the fog. We get over there and were chasing around and we finally get to an Autobahn and he goes down there and there's a command German staff car, he lifted that thing right out of the road, but at that same moment the mud flew up from his .50 caliber shells and went all over our windshield, windscreen. We were somewhat on the low side. But, that's where I ran out of gas when I got back. I kept telling him finally that I was running low, yea, yea , yea so finally after we got back to home base, after I landed and taxied about five hundred yards my engine quit. Ran out of fuel, you see. So, I have a few little experiences that are fun to remember.
- Mark: I want to get into VE Day in a minute, but I want to backtrack first, I have some other questions I thought of training. Now, your training period is going on when the war was just starting to wind up, the war production was starting to wind up, I'm wondering if you had any comments on the quality and quantity of the equipment you were using at that time.
- Clifford: Well, actually I have no complaints at all. I'll have to think awfully hard on that one but, I don't think I have any. No, I think everything was going along fine. The poor people at home had to give up everything they had so we could have everything. So, I think all the equipment worked out pretty good.
- Mark: All the planes seemed modern enough and the uniforms were all standard enough. Some of the stories really early as the war effort was just winding up as they would have different kind of uniforms and there is the 32nd Division story about how they had to dye their khaki's green before they went into the jungle. Your equipment was by this time--

- Clifford: It was standard.
- Mark: Okay. The other thing I wanted to know was about the personal qualifications to be in the Army/Air Forces. It's a fairly elite bunch, I understand.
- Clifford: Well, I'd like to tell you that--[laughs]
- Mark: A lot of other people would, but--
- Clifford: Well, physically and mentally you'd better be pretty damn sharp, because hundreds and hundreds of people are washed out before you even get through your classification period for pilot/navigator/bombardier because they can't pass the written test. Then as far as the physical is concerned they try every damn thing they can do to see if they can antagonize you. One of the questions they asked me and they've asked others, but I was kind of forewarned, is how long has it been since you had intercourse with your mother.
- Mark: I never heard that one.
- Clifford: Just to see--
- Mark: And they are trying to catch you with that one.
- Clifford: Yeah, to see if you get up and knock them down, to see if you have self-control, I guess. So, physically about three days before I took my physical I was butchering a beef, which we did at my folks slaughter house, but I was butchering it out in the field for a farmer and the guy I had with me to help me was coming down the belly with his knife and his knife slipped and hit me right square between the eyes, that was the first thing they asked me at the physical, 'What the hell did you do to yourself, here?', thinking maybe I was in a fist fight or something, you know. But anyway all went well.
- Mark: Let's go to VE Day. You were in England--Do you remember where you were when you first heard--
- Clifford: I remember exactly, every mission you got two ounces of liquor and we all, not everybody, but most all of us saved it all up
- Mark: I assume after the mission was over--
- Clifford: Oh yeah [laughs hard], good point. Yeah, so we saved it all and then VE Day they gave it to you and it was about 3:00 in the afternoon when I finally heard it for sure, the war was over in Europe, so I proceeded along with a few others to get slightly smashed.

- Mark: Slightly? So what were you thinking, because we were still fighting Japan at the time?
- Clifford: Right, and I don't know why they did it to us but they switched us over to P-47 the Republic radial engine eighteen cylinder job, in preparation to move to the South Pacific. Of course, if I had my choice with any plane it would be the P-51 and not the -47, I could give you about forty reasons for that, so anyway we just trained then, dive bombing, a lot of dive bombing a lot of aerial gunnery back to the old training thing again to see if you could hit anything. So, then it went on to, finally, VJ Day came around--
- Mark: How was the reaction to that?
- Clifford: All the fighter bases flew all of their fighter's -38's, -47's and -51's into Wattisham. All those pilots then were sent home. But, about ten of us stayed on and flew them five, six times a day up to Liverpool where they smashed them all up.
- Mark: It seems such a shame.
- Clifford: What a terrible waste. Of course I didn't have any control over it, or I'd stopped it. Fly them up there and they'd bring us back in a B-24 of 17 and get another one. Of course, there was no maintenance, which of course wasn't very good. That's what we did then, so I didn't get home until December of 1945.
- Mark: What was your homecoming like?
- Clifford: Well,
- Mark: Were there parades and all that--
- Clifford: Yeah, that's what you'd like to think but no. Those days were all over with by then. I got back and was let out at Camp McCoy and my father, mother, two sisters and a brother. (My brother had already gotten back from overseas and was already out, came up and picked me up.) So, that was a week after I hit New York Harbor on the aircraft carrier 'Lake Champlain'. So, the homecoming from there on was--
- Mark: You just drove home? Sat in the kitchen?
- Clifford: It was not the home I knew because they had moved from Montford to Madison, so everything was new.
- Mark: After being in the military after all these years did you have any trouble readjusting to civilian life?

- Clifford: Not a bit. I feel very sorry for those that feel that they have to. Of course, I will say another thing, whenever we lost several pilots you never saw them again. So I wasn't like someone in the infantry or the field artillery that are there 24 hours a day, or like my brother the whole damn year and a half that he was there. He was on the line the whole time, there was no R&R. There is no way of getting anytime off and there is no way of getting away from seeing the person sitting next to you shot dead. So maybe they had experiences that I have never ever experienced and maybe don't want to. That's why I guess with me there was no problem at all. When I got back I signed up in the Reserves and the National Guard so I could fly -51's again. Then I got called back in for two and a half years in the Korean situation, but I didn't go overseas then. I just flew jets in the states.
- Mark: Okay we'll come up to that in just a sec. It says here you went to school at the UW; did you use the GI Bill?
- Clifford: Oh yes indeed. Fifty dollars a month.
- Mark: And what did you study?
- Clifford: I went to commerce school, marketing. Sales & Marketing.
- Mark: How long did you go for?
- Clifford: Well, let's see, I graduated in 1947. Spring. So a year and a half, but I went to summer school as well--
- Mark: What was campus life like at the time?
- Clifford: Well, I think the people that were here, it must have felt kind of strange to see all these old characters walking into their classrooms. But the old characters had money. So when you have money you can have girls. It was a fun thing, but I went with National Cash Register Company after that. Actually, counting the service during Korea and all I was with NCR for thirty-eight years.
- Mark: Did you join any veteran organization on campus or afterwards?
- Clifford: I gave thought to it and even though I know the American Legion and the VFW do good things, lobbying and what have you, I never felt it was my part. How many times can you see the same people, week after week, month after month, whatever the hell it is, tell the same stories and each story gets better with another beer. So, no I did not and never felt like I missed anything as a matter of fact, I didn't join Maple Bluff and I didn't join

Nakoma and I didn't join the Kiwanas and I didn't join Rotary or anything else. In the selling profession people always seemed to think that, hell, that's what you do to get contacts. I can't sell my friends. Every friend that you have wants a discount.

Mark: Okay. So you went back in the Reserves then?

Clifford: Yes. Immediately.

Mark: In '47?

Clifford: No, '45.

Mark: Oh, you were in the Reserves while you were in college, then?

Clifford: Yes.

Mark: And you wanted to fly some more?

Clifford: Yes.

Mark: You flew out of Truax?

Clifford: Truax. Then I flew out of Alabama. I flew out of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Mark: You were flying -51's?

Clifford: The beginning was -51's then it ended up the F-80 shooting star--

Mark: That's a jet?

Clifford: That's a single jet. Then the F-89 Twin jet, that's a Scorpion. Which is a lumbering, not too much of anything, I think I used up your hour here, too.

Mark: No, that's okay. I just want to ask a few more questions. You were activated for Korea?

Clifford: Yes.

Mark: But you never left Truax field, apparently?

Clifford: I didn't leave the states, but I was stationed in two or three different places in the United States, but, I think I mentioned in there the damn joke with the scorpion, the F-89 twin engine, they didn't send any guns with it to begin with. So, here we are flying alert, you

get up at 1:00 in the morning and they scramble you out of here and you're up over Sioux St. Marie or some darn place, dark as hell. But, we always used the joke then, you had a radar observer sitting behind you (the first time I ever flew since training with anyone) as you've got another person in the plane, is that if the Russians came over the North Pole toward Madison, Chicago, whatever, we'd fly underneath them and eject the radar observer into them. [Laughs] Dumb joke. [Laughs]

Mark: You could take them down that way.

Clifford: That joke went over like nothing, lead balloon I guess.

Mark: So while you were activated for Korea, what were you told? Why were you activated if there was a war? Was it the Russians you were--

Clifford: Oh sure, we are suppose to protect this whole Northern section here. When I was in Sioux Falls or Sioux City, whatever, they were guarding in that direction, which is a batch of horse manure and the same thing coming from Madison across to Chicago, that were are suppose to cut them off and shoot them down. Which, you know, they play games. Honest to God.

Mark: Okay that's pretty much it for all my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Clifford: Well, I don't think so. I think you have been very kind to take me this long.

Mark: Would you trade your experiences for anything?

Clifford: No.

Mark: You view them as valuable?

Clifford: Oh, indeed. It's a hell of a thing to say but I would have never of learned to fly if it had not been for the damn war but that's a hell of a way to say 50 million people were killed, just so I could fly. But, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. Anyway, I thank you so very much too, I don't know of anything more. You've got everything that I've got here. Haven't you?

Mark: Yeah. All right, excellent.

Clifford: Okay.

[End of Interview]