

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RUPERT G. CORNELIUS
B17 Pilot, Army Air Force, World War II.

1994

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Cornelius, Rupert G., (1922-1999). Oral History Interview, 1994.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Rupert Cornelius describes his training and experiences while preparing to pilot a B-17 and his Air Force service in the European theatre. A student at the University of Wisconsin, he mentions his shock upon learning about Pearl Harbor while stopped in a tavern. Cornelius mentions his reasons for volunteering for the Air Force in 1942. Assigned to Santa Ana (California) for ground school, he describes the exams, training, and types of plane they trained on; speculates about the criteria for different jobs within the Air Force; and mentions that his physical education instructor was Joe DiMaggio. Following ground school, Cornelius went to primary school in Dos Palos (California) to learn flying. He mentions his instructor was a veteran pilot from the Battle of Britain, describes the types of planes and comments on equipment condition. Cornelius details training on single and multi-engine airplanes, types of planes used, transitioning to larger aircraft, and several accidents. He mentions going to Los Angeles during R&R and getting married at Rattlesnake Field (Arizona). Cornelius describes the route getting to Snetterton Heath (England) and his accommodations aboard an Italian freighter. He didn't take part in D-Day because of a fractured skull and nose acquired while playing baseball. Cornelius explains the process of receiving and being briefed on missions. He describes how hundreds of planes assembled in the air for a bombing mission and that (because of chance collision) Cornelius didn't have the bombardier pull the bomb pins until his aircraft had left the coast of England. Cornelius mentions how the increased fighter range enabled them to escort into Germany and how he thought the P-51s saved the war. He talks of his impressions of the bombs' accuracy and his experience being thrown out of a fighter bar. He mentions frequent Ruhr Valley missions, going through flak and details his involvement in the raid on Paris which was his toughest. Describing his experiences conducting experimental flights to determine ballistics of various ammunition types, Cornelius mentions how some information was used in the Dresden bombing. He mentions his aircraft was named "Big Moose" (after his bombardier) and admiration for his crew. Cornelius talks about his experiences with British people, gambling at the officers club; and describes one incident when his winnings were large enough that he treated his entire crew to a three-day party at London's Savoy. Upon return to the United States through New York, Cornelius played baseball for the Air Force for one year before being discharged in December 1945. Cornelius returned to Madison, studied at the University using the GI Bill while in a fraternity, and mentions not having time and therefore never joining any veterans organization.

Biographical Sketch

Cornelius was born and raised in Madison (Wisconsin). He volunteered for the U.S. Army Air Force and served with the 96th Bomb Group, 337th Squadron 8th Air Force in the European Theater. He was discharged in 1946 and completed his Bachelor's Degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1994.

Transcribed by WDVA Staff, 1994.

Transcription edited by John J. McNally, 2006.

WVOHP 1994.12 CORNELIUS, RUPERT (USAAF, WWII, Madison, WI)

August 3, 1994

Mark: This is Mark Van Ells, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archivist and I'm doing an oral history interview today this morning with Mr. Rupert Cornelius of Madison, a B17 pilot during World War II. Good morning.

Cornelius: Good morning.

Mark: Perhaps we could start with some basic information about yourself, this information sheet I had you fill out says you are from Madison. Born and raised here all your life?

Cornelius: Born and raised here.

Mark: What part of town did you grow up in?

Cornelius: I grew up on the East side. East side of Madison. Went to East High School.

Mark: It says here you were born in 1920. So you must have finished high school like about 1938. Do you remember when Hitler attacked Poland? Do you have any specific recollections of this.

Cornelius: Not really. I read about it but it didn't have an impact.

Mark: Do you remember when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Cornelius: Oh yes, we were coming back from Devil's Lake, four of us, stopped at Middleton and stopped in a tavern and heard the news on Sunday night.

Mark: Do you remember your reaction? Shock? Anger?

Cornelius: I was shocked, but at that age, it was - I knew we'd probably all be in the service.

Mark: It says here you entered the service in 1942 as a volunteer.

Cornelius: I volunteered for the Air Force and at that time I was a student at the University. I started in 1940.

Mark: What were you majoring in?

Cornelius: At that time, I was in L & S [Letters and Science] School and thought that I would probably go into business. I had part-time employment on State Street in a clothing store and enjoyed the work and thought that I would--

Mark: Is the store still there?

- Cornelius: No, that was the Edwin Olson Company. I eventually bought the store in 1971, about 30 years later.
- Mark: And you volunteered for the Army Air Forces? What attracted you to the Army Air Forces?
- Cornelius: Well, I'd always liked to fly. I had taken a few lessons at Royal Airport, which is the site of South Towne at the present time in Madison. I really loved to fly and thought that I didn't want to be an infantry soldier.
- Mark: Why not?
- Cornelius: It would be too tough. [chuckle]
- Mark: Too much mud?
- Cornelius: Yea, that never really appealed to me, but flying did and I also liked the pay.
- Mark: You got paid more in the Air Force?
- Cornelius: Flight pay vs. no pay. I think the regular soldiers at that time made \$21 a month. So that part I thought would be kind of neat.
- Mark: Now, the Army Air Forces were kind of the elite of the military at the time. I mean there were a lot of people who wanted to get in the Army Air Forces. I'm interested in your training. Who got in and who didn't. I assume there were a lot of wash-outs.
- Cornelius: Initially, you had to take a physical which was, I suppose, a little more difficult and also a psychological exam and mental exam and I passed those and went to Nashville, TN for an assignment area. I was assigned to Santa Ana, California for Ground School and while I was at Ground School in Santa Ana, my physical education instructor was Joe DiMaggio who was the famous New York Yankee baseball player.
- Mark: At the time he was famous?
- Cornelius: Yea, probably the most famous ball player outside of Babe Ruth in the history of the game, along with Lou Gehrig and we spent two months in Santa Ana.
- Mark: What did your training consist of?
- Cornelius: We went to Ground School and studied Radio, Morse Code, took a course in Mathematics, Navigation, because at that point we didn't know whether we'd become pilots or bombardiers or navigators, so you had to take a more general course and out of that whatever you scored on those dictated whether you would go to Navigation School, or Bombardier School or Pilot School. In addition to that, we

had intense physical training. We would go on 15-20 mile jogs two or three times a week, very strong, very difficult Phy Ed program which I enjoyed. I played a lot of baseball at the University and I enjoyed the athletic part of it.

Mark: I'm interested in some of the other men who were in the Army Air Forces at the time. The Army or Military in general can often be a melting pot of people from all across the country. I'm wondering if you could, perhaps characterize some of your fellow trainees there at the time.

Cornelius: Well, I didn't get to know that many of the men in Ground School in Santa Ana. Much later, when we all became pilots, it was more at Pilot School you got to know the fellows a little more intimately. But it was interesting in Santa Ana where they wash a lot of the people out and one of those who was washed out was an All American Football fullback from Michigan who was washed out because, psychologically, he didn't fit the mold. So, it was very interesting and fellows that you thought were particularly adept athletically, would pass the test with flying colors - so it was very hard to put your fingers on what really constituted a good candidate for a Pilot School.

Mark: It sounds like a combination of different things.

Cornelius: Some of the boys were very smart academically, others were very skillful in the athletic field, others got along very nicely with their fellow men and that was one of the criteria that determined what you became in the military was your ability to get along with other people and certainly in my case, it was extremely important. Because a bomber pilot, later, had to be able to get along with the rest of the men on the crew. Eventually, I was the youngest man on the crew and yet I was the first pilot, so I had people who were 5-7 years older that I was in command of, so...

Mark: Did you have any training in leadership skills or anything like that or did it just come naturally?

Cornelius: No, not really. There was no training that I could put my finger on. I think the fact that I played a lot of baseball, I pitched baseball for the University of Wisconsin and was part of the team, was a big plus for me.

Mark: So, when did you start flying?

Cornelius: I went to Ground School and then went to Dos Palos, California which is in the San Joaquin Valley and at that time I went to Primary School which was two months and we flew anywhere from 3.5 hours dual flight time and some took maybe six hours dual flight time before they were allowed to solo.

Mark: What kind of planes were you flying at this time?

Cornelius: Well, we only had one type of plane, there was a PT Ryan it, along with the Stearman, were two primary trainers for the Air Force at that time. I was very

fortunate, I had a veteran pilot from the Battle of Britain was my instructor. He came over to the United States and was assigned to Dos Palos. He was a British pilot. He flew a Beaufort plane in the Battle of Britain and he gave me a great deal of confidence, allowed me to do things with the airplane that most instructors probably never taught their students. So this was a big plus for me.

Mark: To get your training from an experienced person.

Cornelius: Someone who had been in combat. Most of the instructors were civilian instructors. I graduated from Primary School in Dos Palos and went about 25 miles up the highway to Merced, California. In Merced we learned to fly the basic trainer which we called the Vultee vibrator. It was a plane that literally shook when you gave it full throttle. It was really a bucket of bolts, but it was a good plane to learn the rudiments of flying.

Mark: That brings up kind of an interesting point. Now this is 1942.

Cornelius: No, this is 1943.

Mark: War production was just starting to pick up at this time and I wonder if you have any comments or insights on some of the equipment that you were given. You mentioned a bucket of bolts. As you were going through your training did better equipment come around?

Cornelius: No, not really. It was just that this was the way the plane was referred to because of its vibration. We had, I think, a marvelous equipment. I never had any trouble mechanically with the plane, so as far as I was concerned, it was top drawer. We finished in Basic at Merced and then I was assigned to Yuma, Arizona in the month of July and August, 1943 which was about 110 degrees every day in Yuma.

Mark: I was stationed there once myself. I was in Phoenix, but I know the hot...

Cornelius: It was the land of the Gila monsters. There I learned to fly the AT17 and the AT6 and at that point, was hoping that I would become a pursuit pilot.

Mark: Yea, I'm not that familiar with the airplanes, unfortunately, so these are all like single engine?

Cornelius: No, the AT17 was a twin engine and they had an AT9 which was also a twin engine, much faster and we also had AT6's and it was more of a diversified inventory of planes because at that point, they didn't know whether you were going to go to a fighter squad or to a bomber squad or how you were going to be assigned. That depended, I think at that time, on the need the Air Force had for various types of pilots. I wanted to be a pursuit pilot, but I had three or four of my closest friends all wanted to be pursuit pilots and some of them did become pursuit pilots and I became a bomber pilot. So, on graduation, I was assigned to a transition school for flying fortresses in Hobbs, New Mexico and I spent two months in Hobbs learning how to

fly the B17 and it was there that I learned all about the B17 and what it could do and what it couldn't do and all of its flying characteristics.

Mark: Those flying characteristics, perhaps you could describe them a little more.

Cornelius: It was a marvelous airplane and later when I was in combat, I marveled even more at its ability to fly when it had been shot at and parts of the plane were blown away. It was very stable, it was, I thought, easy to fly and I had a great deal of confidence in it. It did what it was supposed to do and to me it was an ideal airplane.

Mark: What did your training consist of with the B17. Did you practice bombing runs for example?

Cornelius: We learned to take off and landing and touch and go landings, how to fly in formation, we got into that a little bit, in our operational training unit we did a lot more of the formation flying. But, you could learn its characteristics of the flight, at what point it would stall, what point you could go over the red line if necessary as far as air speed was concerned,

Mark: What's the red line?

Cornelius: The red line in an airplane, you can't go over 285 mph or whatever. It was a safety feature that they had, this red line was on your tachometer, so you would kind of force the issue in many cases, to see the outer limits that you could push the plane and you could stand it on its wing tip when you're up 10 to 11,000 feet and feel how it turned when you needed to have a tight turn, how it would stall, what kind of acceleration it had.

Mark: This is undoubtedly the biggest plane you ever flew up to that time.

Cornelius: Yes. At that point, I think it was the biggest plane that the Air Force had. The B29 didn't appear for several months later.

Mark: Did it affect your flying?

Cornelius: The fact that it was a big airplane?

Mark: Yea, I'm thinking like if you drive a Honda and then all of a sudden you get behind the wheel of a truck. It feels different, you can't park it, things feel different.

Cornelius: Not really, I think that the Air Force did a very good job in acclimating you as you went along. It was just a natural step as far as I was concerned. Even though I wanted pursuit airplanes, all of a sudden I'm given an airplane with four engines instead of one, but they brought you along in Ground School and in flight training so that you sort of wore it, just like you wore a suit. You sort of became part of the airplane. One thing you had to do was you had to fly the plane - you couldn't let the airplane fly you, and that was probably the biggest thing that happened in people

washing out of the Air Forces, the fact that the plane overwhelmed them and they weren't in control. I learned very quickly that the airplane will respond if you are in charge and if you are not in charge, forget it.

Mark: Kind of like a computer?

Cornelius: I guess so.

Mark: So when did you discover that you were going to England?

Cornelius: Well, I went from Hobbs to Salt Lake City and picked up my crew and then was assigned to OTU (Operational training Unit) in Rattlesnake Field, Texas. Near Paiute was a little town that was adjacent to the airport. At that time, when we learned formation flying and when we would learn to go on a bomb run, also our gunners were trained then to shoot at targets that were being towed by B26's. Then we learned cross-country flying, we'd fly at night from Texas to Oklahoma or to Albuquerque and back to Rattlesnake Field. One of the times when I had a close call was one night over Albuquerque it was about 1:30 in the morning and my copilot had passed out, he had been out drinking the night before, I looked at the cylinder head temperatures on two of the engines and they were above the red line and then the #3 engine caught on fire and then the primer pump that we had on the left of the pilot's seat started to leak and I had the gasoline running in the cockpit. I finally got the fire out in the #3 engine, controlled the cylinder head temperatures in the two engines, I got back to Paiute about 3:00 in the morning and promptly fired my copilot.

Mark: How do you get a fire out in an engine?

Cornelius: You can do it two ways. You can dive or you have a foam and you release a mechanism in the cockpit on that individual engine and the foam sometimes takes the fire out of the engine, which in this case, it did.

Mark: That brings up an interesting point. Training accidents. It's dangerous business to fly these big planes around in formations and things like that. Are there many other incidents like the one you just described?

Cornelius: I was doing a cross-country at Merced, California and the electrical system went out when I was flying down to Fresno and it was about 11:30 at night and when the electrical system went out I started to see that the florescent lights in my instrument panel were starting to fade and I had a flashlight in my pocket. I reached in my pocket to get the flashlight, it was a little penknife and I twisted the end of the flashlight because it was not the type that you can just push a button and I twisted it the wrong way and the flashlight fell apart and went under my seat and I couldn't get the three parts that were flying around in the cockpit and I had no idea then what my air speed was but I spotted a group of planes making a pattern and I hooked up behind one of them, not knowing my air speed, not knowing anything about the airport and I came in behind another airplane and scared the daylights out of the guys in the tower. Here's a strange airplane coming in with no lights and so fortunately, I

was able to spot a plane that was about the same make as mine and I could come in at the same air speed, but I had no idea whether I was going 60 mph or 150 mph when I came in to land.

The other incident was I took off from Yuma, Arizona on a hot day and got up about 100 feet and the tire blew out on the left side and I had a full load of gas and I had to fly around Yuma, Arizona for an hour and a half to dispense the gas and then I came in to land with the tire on the left side blown out. Fortunately, I held the left wing high and landed on one wheel and was able to get out from under. But those are a couple of the salient things that happened in training that both of these incidents almost recurred exactly in combat.

Mark: I spoke to Gordon Marlow a couple of weeks ago and he described how in training there were quite a few people who were killed. Their planes would crash and such things. Did that happen in areas where you were training?

Cornelius: Yes, I think we had three pilots that were playing tag in California and slammed into the foothills of the continental mountains. We had, in Basic Training, someone got lost and landed near Yosemite (crashed) and also we had two fellows who were killed in Yuma, one on takeoff and one where we never really knew how he was killed. We also had two planes that crashed together in Paiute, Texas and that had a loss of life of about 20. These things were never close to me, but we would hear about them. I never had any close calls like that.

Mark: One more thing about training before we go overseas, did you happen to get off the base much while you were training in the states? You mentioned your copilot who came drunk.

Cornelius: We were off - when we were in Santa Ana we liked to go into Hollywood and go to the Brown Derby and LA was a great town for cadets and then in Basic Training we'd go up to Yosemite whenever we had a chance and one night I almost got killed at a tavern when some migrant workers didn't like the way that the three cadets were dressed, apparently. They pulled their knives on us and we ran out of that tavern in a hurry and down the road.

Mark: Like I can imagine that Los Angeles would be an exciting place. You'd never been there before?

Cornelius: No, I'd never been there.

Mark: What did you do in a place like Yuma or Rattlesnake Gulch? Rattlesnake Field - what was it?

Cornelius: Rattlesnake Field. In Yuma, there was not too much to do there. We would go into Pecos and hang out. I was married at Rattlesnake Field to Frances Kessenich who lived here in Madison. We were students together at the University so we would go out and eat in the evening and we shared an apartment with another pilot and his wife

and so we had a very nice life. I think we paid \$15 dollars a month for our apartment. It wasn't the Taj Mahal though.

Mark: So when did you get to England?

Cornelius: I went to England in April of 1944, just prior to the invasion.

Mark: Perhaps you can describe the process of getting there. You had to fly the planes over there ...

Cornelius: No, I didn't. We took a train from Paiute, Texas to a staging center in Nebraska and from there we took a train to New York City, and then from there to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey and took a boat from there to Edinburgh, Scotland and from there we took a train down to Stone, England to a staging area and at that time they made the assignments to the various bomb groups that were in England at that time. So I was taken to a place called Snetterton Heath in England and we sat there for a couple of weeks waiting to be assigned, meantime, I played baseball and ran into my copilot chasing a fly ball and I broke my nose and fractured my skull when I collided with him so I ended up in the hospital and I didn't get out of the hospital until the day after D-Day, the 7th of June.

Mark: You must have collided pretty hard with him.

Cornelius: Oh, I did.

Mark: I'm interested in the ship.

Cornelius: It was an Italian freighter and on that particular trip across the ocean, they also had several units of nurses who were on there at the same time which made for a pretty gay party for the single guys who were on the boat. They did bed check and quite a few of them were up in the life boats under the side of the boat.

Mark: Most of the gentlemen I've spoken with who took ship transportation to Europe were enlisted guys and they described being packed into five guys in a room or something like that. Now, you were an officer, I'm wondering if officers had different accommodations?

Cornelius: We had wonderful accommodations. As far as I was concerned it was perfect. I think I had a room with my copilot and we had wonderful food, played poker all the way over, had a great time.

Mark: Did you win some money?

Cornelius: No. I had a Parker 51 pen which was all the rage at that time and I got down to the point where I had to ante up the Parker 51 pen, so I won more money and got my pen back and I ended up about even when I landed in Europe.

- Mark: What was the mood like on the ship? People are going off to war - were they scared?
- Cornelius: Well, I don't think you really had any idea about what it was all about. You were all in the same boat, literally! As far as I was concerned, this guys gotta do it and I've gotta do it. I don't think you had any vision of facing death. Charlie was doing it, I was doing it. That same feeling prevailed even in combat because everybody had to get up at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning, if you were a pilot or on the crew so you were no different from anybody else. I never gave a thought to fellows who weren't in the service or were sitting at a desk job or anything. Frankly, I loved to fly and while I didn't particularly care for the shooting at me, I thought it was a great privilege to be able to go there and spend \$300 or \$400 an hour of somebody else's money, gasoline and let me do all this wonderful stuff.
- Mark: Perhaps you could describe when you got to your first bomber group.
- Cornelius: They sent my crew up and I was released from the hospital and then I went to the base up near Norwich, England ...
- Mark: Bolington, England? On one of these sheets it says ...
- Cornelius: I was assigned to Bovington, England later during the tour, but I went to Snetterton Heath which at Thetford, England and my crew was waiting for me there and at that time, which was shortly after D-Day, we had had quite a few losses in the group and I was assigned to fly the day after I got there and I had never been up in a plane in England before, but I was assigned to fly a first mission with my crew and I was a little bit nervous because trying to get together over England with 200-300 airplanes was a challenge because in the States we never encountered those numbers and you had to take off and find a guy shooting a Very pistol with a red red flare on it and you could see these flares going up and they would be red green, red yellow or red navy whatever type of flare but you would search around to find where our flare was and when I found it we were at about 10,000 feet and we had to climb up to about 13 or 14,000 to reach my group that I was assigned to with the red red flare. Going across England at that altitude with that many airplanes you had to watch above you, below you on the left side, on the right side and then you encounter prop wash. Just the assembly part of getting ready for a bombing mission was an extremely hazardous situation because I, in the course of my combat career, I've probably seen as many as ten collisions over England before they even got set for the combat and the planes were full of bombs. Fortunately, the bombs had the pins in them as a general rule so that if they crashed they hopefully didn't explode, but some did. My bombardier didn't pull the pins until we left the coast of England. Just getting together was very difficult. You were never sure what somebody was going to do because the fellow that you are encountering might have been from a base that you never heard of, you didn't know the flying characteristics of this particular pilot. When you got into your own group, it was a little different, eventually you knew whether this guy was a little bit erratic or this guy was a great pilot or whatever. The assembly was a very difficult part of the program.

Mark: Your first mission was to where?

Cornelius: First mission was to an airfield just over the channel, probably 100 miles east of St. Lo France. It was a very easy mission and we came back and we all thought this was sort of a cake walk or milk run.

Mark: I'm interested in the steps of that first mission. You wake up and you go to the briefing room and you would know you were going on a mission but you wouldn't know where it was?

Cornelius: Well, what happened was they had a sentry who would come through the Quonset hut and tap you on the shoulder and say "OK, Lt. Cornelius, you're flying today" so he would then wake up my copilot, navigator and bombardier who were the same Quonset and we went to the Mess Hall for breakfast and from there took a jeep down to the briefing room.

Mark: What time of day is this?

Cornelius: I can't recall exactly but it was around 4:30 in the morning. It was still dark. Then the pilots sat together and the commanding officer of the squadron would come in and talk about the need for team work, need to keep the thing together, the need for staying in formation and not being a hero and not breaking out of formation. Stay up in there and adhere to the rules that we had been taught and then they would pull the curtain back and would show the mission. Show you the town that we were going to bomb or the target, the route in and the route out and explain why we took this route because our intelligence knew that certain flak barges were in this area or flak installations were in here and would tell us where the German airfields were and what type of airplane we could expect to come up against and what the wind direction was, the velocity, at whatever altitude we would hit the target at (e.g., 18,000 feet), overcast or undercast or whether we would encounter any kind of storm and tell us where the initial point or the IP point was. The initial point (IP) was the start of the bomb run and that could be as many as 10-20 miles away from the target so that you would have to get at that IP in your proper formation and you wouldn't deviate one degree one way or another from that point on because they needed that stability for the bombardiers to zero in on the targets, so that if you encountered flak at 18,000 feet at a heading of 68 degrees you stayed there. You didn't go to 69 degrees or you didn't go to 65 degrees and you didn't go up or down 500 feet to avoid the flak. You had to fly it and you could see the flak bursting in front of you but you still had to fly through it. You couldn't move your plane to try to avoid it. Whereas the fighter pilots could avoid flak. So we went in and as I remember it was an airfield near St. Lo and we went in with no resistance. We went to the IP point, got on the bomb run, dropped the bombs, made the turn properly, and had absolutely no problem. We came back and landed and I don't think we lost a plane in the whole 96 bomb group. It was one of those days when no one was shot down or had a malfunction.

- Mark: At this point was there much fighter escort, perhaps France wouldn't be a problem but I see on this sheet, Schweinfurt.
- Cornelius: Schweinfurt we had fighter cover with the P-51's and this was in February 1944, a critical time for the 8th Air Force. I wasn't even there at that point, but they couldn't get into the real deep part of Germany because the fighters didn't have the capacity to stay with the bombers, they didn't have the fuel. So, in February the P51 Mustang came along and it had wing tanks and with the advent of the wing tanks it enabled us to go way into Czechoslovakia or go into Munich, an 8-hour haul without a problem. That's really what saved the 8th Air Force because up until then it was touch and go.
- Mark: The big Schweinfurt raid in 1943 was devastating.
- Cornelius: We were completely annihilated. That was a very, very tough and Regensburg was another one in '43 that I don't know what the casualties were but as I remember something like 36,000 airmen were killed in the 8th Air Force.
- Mark: And that's really deep into Germany, too.
- Cornelius: When we got into Regensburg and Schweinfurt that's pretty deep. The toughest haul was, from a standpoint of time, was Munich. That was way down in southern Germany and if we hadn't had the 51's at that point, they couldn't even have gone in there. I've always held a great deal of gratitude to the P-51's. To me, they saved the war.
- Mark: Did you have much contact with the pilots when you got back? Were they on a different base? Did you see each other.
- Cornelius: Well, just the pilots in our own base, as a general rule. I had a friend who was a P51 pilot over there at that time, but he was at a fighter base and he would come over and visit me once in a while.
- Mark: How did you guys interact?
- Cornelius: Well, the fighter pilots were a lot more carefree than the bomber pilots. Fighter pilots were also as a general rule, younger. They were 19, 20, 21 years old and I was 22. I remember one time they had a , we were on leave in London at the Savoy Hotel, sort of a hangout for our crew, we liked to go to the Savoy, and I walked in I didn't notice that it was a fighter bar. So, I got in and sat down at the bar and had a couple of drinks and I started lipping off a little bit about how great the bomber pilots were, and there was a fighter pilot on the right side of me sitting at the bar and another one on the left side. After about ten minutes of this, they just picked me up, one on each arm, zipped me right out the door. Bomber pilots were not allowed in the fighter pilots' bar. Actually, we were all pilots but they were a little different breed of cat.

Mark: That was at Luke Air Force Base which was an attack base at the time and the fighter pilots and they were kind of a cocky bunch.

Cornelius: Very cocky. They took a lot of chances, they were fantastic pilots, but they would do, you'd be on a mission and you'd be plowing through the flak and if it came near them, they'd just pull the stick back and they were gone. They didn't want any part of it and I didn't blame them. If it weren't for them we wouldn't have won the war.

Mark: You mentioned some runs here, I'm just going to ask you, see if you have any recollections of these. I see Cologne here. This wasn't the thousand plane raid was it?

Cornelius: No, I wasn't on that, but we would hit the Ruhr Valley quite frequently and Cologne was one of the cities that I remember going over. We were talking about it yesterday, that even though we went over Cologne and dropped our bombs, we didn't hit the churches and cathedrals.

Mark: I read somewhere where pilots were told "Don't hit the big cathedrals."

Cornelius: Well, it wasn't because, I don't think we purposely tried not to, I don't think we were very accurate if you want to know the truth. I don't think that we were that accurate. When you think that radar was virtually undeveloped at that point and you're dropping something from 18,000 feet and the wind may be going NE at 14,000 and SE when the bomb is down to 3,000 ft., and I don't think that we were that accurate. I can remember on the one raid that was the toughest I ever had,

Mark: Which one was that?

Cornelius: It was Paris, and unfortunately, I couldn't even drop any bombs because we were disabled before I could unload the bombs.

[End of Side A, Tape 1]

But, that particular time, the group hit the petroleum jelly manufacturing plant in Paris which enabled them to knock out the tanks that were holding up the advance of the troops in St. Lo. So, our troops were held back because the tanks had this petroleum jelly and the fuel, but once this was knocked out, our ground troops rolled right through St. Lo. In that particular case, I know that we were very accurate, but on balance, I'm not sure how accurate we were.

Mark: What were you told your targets were - industrial facilities, airfields, what?

Cornelius: We were told whether it was an airfield or a marshaling yard and those were very high priority targets, because if you knocked out the railroads, they couldn't move the tanks, ammunition, food, and everything else. One was the sub pen in St. Lo. There was a German General holding out there and he was in this sub pen and they couldn't get through. Another one was the submarine manufacturing in

Mark: Bremen? I see Bremen here.

Cornelius: No, Bremen was a lot of oil and also the harbor at Bremen was extremely important. Bremen I think I went three or four times. Very tough target.

Stettin was where the submarines were up in the North Sea and of course the submarines were playing hell with all of the shipping in the Atlantic.

Mark: On the data sheet I had you fill out it talks about the ten experimental missions and I wondered if you might have some comment.

Cornelius: At this point, 50 years later, I guess we can talk about it but I was assigned to Bovington, England with a group of experimental aircraft and what I was assigned to do was to take airplanes up and determine the ballistics of various types of ammunition or ways that the Air Force was trying to figure out how to get into targets and completely destroy the targets. One of them in particular was big rubber tanks of a gelatin fuel that I took off with in the bomb bays of my airplane with two photographers and the purpose of this was to determine the ballistics of how these things would float through the air so that they would know at what point to release the bombs when they were over the target. The photographers were stationed in the bomb bays at each end of the bomb bay and as I dropped these big gelatin tanks out the photographers took the pictures and the trajectory of the tanks as they would free fall through the air. This was done over the English Channel far and away from the other ships - usually up in the North Sea part of the English Channel. The ultimate outcome of those particular missions was the firebombing of Dresden which occurred in 1945 which completely annihilated the city of Dresden. What happened there was that the general demolition bombs were dropped by the first wave, the second wave went in with these so called jelly bombs and the third group went in with fragmentary bombs to set fire to the place and as everyone knows the history of those raids it was a complete annihilation of Dresden.

Another mission was to determine the trajectory of the fragmentary bombs as they fell out because they were all bundled and once they left the bomb bay they broke open and it was the job of the photographer to try to see how those would fly through the air and obviously this was a highly secret operation at that particular time.

Another part of the raid was trying to get the German General out of the sub pen in St. Lo who had been holed up there for several days after the invasion and was preventing a full-blown invasion because of his presence in the sub pen and what this consisted of was two large bombs being strapped under my B17 which they were too big to go into the bomb bays. The leading edge of the bomb was solid steel and it extended all the way back past the trailing edge of the wing and they were strapped on the plane. They were so heavy that the tires of the airplane looked like they were almost flat and it was my job to determine the ballistics of this particular bomb so we took everything out of the plane that we possibly could to make it as light as possible. We taxied out to the end of the runway and virtually stood on the brakes

while we revved the engines up to full throttle and finally got off the mark went down the Bovington runway which was very uneven and barely got off the ground, ripped out a fence at the end of the runway with our tail, got the airplane up to about 10,000 feet after a long time, and dropped the bomb off of the left wing and when we did, we still had one hung up on the right side so the plane immediately went into a dive on the right side. We finally pulled the plane out at about 1500 feet off the North Sea and slowly worked our way back up again to drop that one and scared the hell out of me as well as my copilot. Then they informed me that the German General was still there and since I had already taken the plane out it was my duty to go over the next morning and get him out of there by dropping the bomb on the sub pen. Needless to say, that night we went into Watford, which is a little town near Bovington and the tavern was serving liquor at two different hours, one at 3:00 in the afternoon and one at 7:00. I bought all the liquor they had for both shifts, wouldn't allow anyone in except the people who my bombardier liked. My bombardier stood at the front door of the tavern and annihilated the feelings of a lot of British people I'm sure, but we proceeded to drink all the booze that they had for the 3:00 shift and the 7:00 shift and the next morning, we were to take the plane, strap the bombs on the underside of the wing and my copilot and I were shaking to death partly because of the hangover from the night before, but also because we realized that we were very lucky to get it off the first time and we didn't think we could make this one. We had started the engines and were just pulling the chocks to start to taxi out when a US General's car came up and the General rolled down the window and said that the mission was canceled, that the German General had surrendered that morning. So that was the end of that.

Mark: Lucky for you!!

Cornelius: And as a reward for the various things that we did, those ten missions that were performed in Bovington, they gave me the airplane and I was allowed to fly anywhere I wanted to fly in the British Isles for a week. So we went to Belfast and various bases where we had friends and we'd just fly in and tell them to gas it up and we'd go on somewhere else.

Mark: I'm interested in how you got selected for this. Did you volunteer for these missions?

Cornelius: I don't know. They told me it would be experimental and no combat involved and I thought that would be pretty neat. I didn't particularly like being shot at and so I volunteered for it.

Mark: You mentioned that the raid on Paris was perhaps the most difficult one you were on? I was wondering if you could discuss the German anti-aircraft air defenses. Did you find them formidable?

Cornelius: Very difficult in Paris because they protected that with their life. What happened was that we went into the mission about 6:00 in the afternoon and the lead pilot was shot, and the flak hit his plane and he couldn't perform so he had to abort. The

second plane (the deputy lead) was also hit very early on and he couldn't perform. So that left the number 3 man to take these airplanes over the target. In that particular airplane was the commanding officer of the base and he took over. He was not a regular pilot, he was just around that day for observation. The flak was the most intense that I had ever encountered even in later missions, never anything as difficult as Paris. We went into the target and I got hit, I heard a big thump in the bottom of my plane and then the number 4 engine was hit and caught on fire, the number 2 engine was hit so that the turbo supercharger was set at a certain number of inches of mercury and I couldn't move them up or I couldn't move them down so I had a constant propeller. We couldn't drop our bombs and so we made a turn to go back and go over the target again and instead of turning to the left we turned to the right and we turned into where the flak was unbelievable and it was there that we came around again and Martin, my friend, was shot down in front of me and a fellow behind me was shot down so that within a space of 300 feet two planes had been brought down, one in front and one behind me. We had the bomb bay doors open and I said told them to drop the bombs and nothing happened. Our electrical release had been hit, we couldn't drop the bombs electrically so I told the radio operator and the engineer to go back and try to rip the bombs off the wall and they couldn't get them off the wall so here we are with the bomb bay doors open and a full load of bombs and two engines virtually out, then they shot out the glycol heater, temperatures dropped to about -60 degrees in the cabin and despite the fact that it was -60 degrees, sweat was running down my face and into my oxygen mask. It was at that time that the tissue at the back of my neck froze and I froze the tips of my fingers and my feet, because I only had a pair of loafers on because the raid was only in France and I didn't put on the heavy boots. We had to leave the group because I had the two engines and the full load and I couldn't keep up with the rest of them as they were coming back and from 18000 feet we got down to virtually ground level when I came into my airport in Bedford. On the way back over the channel we lowered the wheels and my turret man called me and said "Lt., we only have one wheel. They have shot the left wheel off." So, I thought, Oh my God here I go again, this is exactly what happened when I blew a tire in Yuma, Arizona and it was the left wheel and sure enough, the wheel was gone and the tire was gone and so we came in for a landing with the left wing high, still had a full load of bombs by the way and unbeknownst to me my ball turret man and my bombardier had gotten into the bomb bays and held the pins on the bomb while we landed on one wheel with a full load. The pins had been pulled when we left the channel going into France earlier in the day. It was a miracle that we got back.

Mark: Some other things about your military experience. I wonder if you could discuss the men in your crew?

Cornelius: Wonderful!! Outside of the one I had to fire. My copilot later became a general, he stayed in Europe and did another tour.

Mark: What was his name?

Cornelius: John Bee. He became involved with SAC later on. My ball turret man after graduating from the University of Chicago, joined the CIA and was with the CIA for probably 35 years. My navigator was a student at Notre Dame. My bombardier was a student in college in Cleveland, they evoked a certain bond, when you live through ...

Mark: Did they all survive the war?

Cornelius: Oh yes, I didn't have a single person injured. My copilot was incapacitated for a while. We were flying our third mission in three days to Munich when we had just taken off and suddenly he vomited through his mask and the blood came shooting out of his mouth, he had a lesion on his lung. We would take a carton of cigarettes with us in the morning and put it on the instrument panel and he and I proceeded to smoke ten packs of cigarettes and he couldn't fly. I put him in the bomb bay, tried to get the engineer to sit in the right hand seat and fly with me, but he couldn't do that, John was put in the prone position down in the bombardier's department. We came back from Munich, put him in the hospital and he recovered and was flying within a week and a half.

Mark: You survived 25 missions. I spoke with Jack Miller this last week and he told me that was very unusual, to survive 25 missions. Is that your experience as well?

Cornelius: No, you gotta remember I was there a little later. I think anybody who was there in '43 and survived 25 missions they were damn lucky. Yet, there were people who went in after I came home, that didn't survive. But it wasn't like the pilots in '43 or early '44, it wasn't that tough.

Mark: Do you think it was the fighter cover?

Cornelius: Fighter cover, basically. Because the flak was more intense later than it was earlier. But it was the fighters being held in check by our 51's that helped tremendously.

Mark: Do you have a name for your aircraft?

Cornelius: Big Moose, Big Moose 1 and 2. The first one we got 128 holes in it one day and it couldn't fly anymore so then they gave me this new one.

Mark: Where did you come up with the name "Big Moose."

Cornelius: My bombardier's name was Moose.

Mark: There were no naked ladies on your plane?

Cornelius: No, I didn't have any.

Mark: It was pretty common to have a name for your plane. I spoke with Jack Miller and he said he didn't really have an interest in that sort of thing.

- Cornelius: I don't know--maybe one out of ten would have it. Of course the Memphis Belle is the most famous. There were a lot of them with naked girls on them. But then there were also a huge number of B-24's over there too all with nose art.
- Mark: Perhaps we could move on to some nonmilitary things. I'm wondering about your relationships with the British people. You mentioned this in passing several times that you went off base and went to the pubs and that sort of thing. I'm wondering if you could comment on the relationships between the Americans and the British. Were they cordial?
- Cornelius: My experience was that they were very cordial. I think there were some times when the American pilots or soldiers there got out of hand, got drunk and probably because we had no money, and they would take the girls out, and obviously, this created tension between the soldiers of Britain and the United States. I never had an encounter with anyone and was treated very cordially. I went to church in London and on the base and would go to the taverns and in the spare time I had, I had a wonderful relationship with them. I visited Cambridge and some of the museums and the old churches and I never had a problem.
- Mark: Was this your first trip overseas?
- Cornelius: First time.
- Mark: So, aside from young guys fighting and stuff, you didn't have much trouble with the British people?
- Cornelius: Not at all. I had a wonderful time.
- Mark: What did people on the base do during their free time?
- Cornelius: Well basically, we would gamble. We'd go to the Officer's Club and write letters home, but basically, gambled. I can remember one time winning a huge sum of money at the officer's club on pay-day.
- Mark: What did you play?
- Cornelius: We were shooting dice. In fact, I practically cleaned out the Officer's Club. One time I had so much money, I had money in every closet, I had so much money I gave it to my bombardier to carry and I thought I'd be off the next day so I thought this is really fantastic, I've got all this money. So, I send about \$5,000 or \$6,000 home to my wife and I kept the rest which was three or four times that and I said, "Well, we'll go down to London and really have some fun." Come to find out, the Captain who was in my Quonset hut became ill that night. I got back from the Officer's Club about 2:00 in the morning after shaking dice all night and he informed me that I was flying in his place. Here I am sitting here with all this money and I didn't know what to do with it. I couldn't get into the Adjutant's office because it was closed, and I

didn't want to take it over Europe because if I'm shot down - so the only thing I can do is put it in my pillow case, make my bed and hope I make it back and if I do my money is still here. So, I flew the mission, came back and when I was coming back in over the channel I called in for a jeep and had the jeep waiting for me when I landed I went down to the hut, tore into the bed to find the money and sure enough, it was all still there, hadn't been stolen, contrary to what happened sometimes. One time I was an MIA (missing in action), I came back 45 minutes later and my locker had been cleaned out, someone had stolen everything. Anyway, I had all this money so I called the copilot and told him we're going to have the next two days off and we're going to the Savoy in London, so I told him to go up and get the enlisted men and go get some booze and I was going to go back to interrogation and we'd meet at the train station. The enlisted men were already there and had 2 or 3 quarts of Irish Potato Whiskey and there were no seats on the train for John and me and so we sat in the baggage car with two or three crates of live geese and these are live geese and they were pooping all the way from Thetford all the way through Cambridge to London. We hadn't eaten, been on a mission, tired, but had all this whiskey. Obviously by the time we got to the train station in London we were feeling no pain. Went to the Savoy, took my enlisted men and the officers, ten of us, rented one whole side of a corridor, all the rooms in the Savoy and held a party for three days.

Mark: I'd like to have been on your crew I guess. Was there a lot of drinking?

Cornelius: I would say so.

Mark: More than you've done since you left the service?

Cornelius: Oh yes. I never even drank in college before the war. I didn't smoke either, but when I got in combat and came back. I was really initiated to it when I was interrogated because the first day I came back from a mission, sitting at the table was Scotch. They did it because they wanted you to talk a little bit. So, I got initiated and kind of liked it. The bombardier liked it, the navigator liked it, so, it was a way of life.

Mark: Did you see much black market activity? When I was in Europe, American cigarettes - the Germans always wanted American cigarettes. There was supposed to be rationing going on, but if you really wanted a good steak or something like that, you didn't see much of this?

Cornelius: I didn't see much of that. I think because as a young pilot, virtually anything was available to me. You didn't think about the black market. Cigarettes were a nickel a pack or something like that. Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields.

Mark: Your last mission, number 25, do you remember that?

Cornelius: Yes, my last mission was to Bremen.

Mark: Was that a tough one?

- Cornelius: Yes. They blew the guy off on my right wing and in fact, his copilot, got a direct hit and severed his head and his head rolled along the catwalk and the pilot was looking toward me, and it was a very difficult mission mentally.
- Mark: I'm interested in your thoughts and feelings as you were landing the plane on mission 25. What's going through your mind? Did you know that this was your last mission? What are you thinking as you're landing the plane?
- Cornelius: Geez, I hope nothing happens here - just take it easy and don't try any funny stuff. Hope you don't blow a tire and get in there and that's it.
- Mark: Pop champagne cork!
- Cornelius: So I came back after that and I was an instructor in Columbus, Ohio. One day I was playing baseball in the hanger and the commanding officer came along and said "You ever play baseball before?" I said that I pitched for Wisconsin. He asked "Why don't you go for the Air Force?" So, I joined the U.S. Air Force baseball team and did nothing in 1945 except go around the United States playing baseball. Not bad duty. I also got my flight pay because I sat in the right-hand seat and flew 4 hours a month.
- Mark: I'm interested in your thoughts and things coming back to the States. It says you got back to the US in December of 1944 and your last mission was ... and the time between your last mission and your return...
- Cornelius: My last mission was at the end of September so it was a question of where are you going to depart from and you have to go to a holding area. I went back to Stone, England and sat there for almost six weeks waiting for transportation back to the US and at the same time, they were bringing guys out of Norway and Sweden who had flown up there and been interned and these guys had all kinds of money because they were still being paid but they didn't get their pay while they were up there, they got their pay when they got back to Stone, England, so I can remember sitting in black jack games and guys around the table - it would be \$100 a card - in those days! You had to have a couple thousand bucks to be the dealer. There'd be eight guys sitting there. This went on day after day after day in Stone, England. It was kind of entertaining. I came back on the Queen Elizabeth. It was fantastic - I had my own stateroom, someone to shine my shoes, someone to press my clothes, I never lived so well.
- Mark: And you landed in New York City?
- Cornelius: Yes.
- Mark: See the Statue of Liberty? Were you glad to be back?

- Cornelius: Yes. I wanted to get back to my wife and I thought I wanted to be an instructor, but when I found out I could play baseball I wanted that better.
- Mark: When you were stationed in Ohio, did your wife come down there?
- Cornelius: My wife came back in December and we went to Miami, took the train down.
- Mark: Did you have some leave time?
- Cornelius: Well, we had rehabilitation and combat. I was down there for almost a month and a half and she lived with me in a wonderful hotel - great life on Miami Beach. From there I went to Columbus, Ohio and was later discharged from Columbus after playing ball for all of 1945.
- Mark: When did you finally get discharged from the service?
- Cornelius: In December of 1945.
- Mark: And that's when you came back to Madison?
- Cornelius: Yes. We got an apartment on Livingston Street and went to school in 1946 and graduated in the summer of '47.
- Mark: I'm interested in your reactions to coming back to Madison. Had it changed over the years you were gone? How'd you feel about being back? What were your priorities? What did you want to do?
- Cornelius: Well, when I was here before, I was single. When I came back I was married and my priorities took a little different tact. I was anxious to get to school. I think I was a much more mature student when I came back. I studied more diligently, got better grades, had a nice life and then I had a child born in 1947. The town, to me, hadn't changed that much.
- Mark: By '46,'47 the campus was pretty much filled with vets, huh?
- Cornelius: I would say yes. I don't know what the percentage was, but it was certainly a high percentage of vets.
- Mark: Did the GI's socialize together, or keep to themselves or what was your experience on campus?
- Cornelius: I was in a fraternity when I left and in a fraternity when I came back, so I had my fraternity friends and I had my Madisonian friends and then the new people. I went to Business School and concentrated in that area academically and so those friends became much closer to me - in the Business School. My wife had lived here all of her life and her grandfather lived on Gorham Street and she'd lived in Maple Bluff for all of her life so she had a lot of friends here. So, our social group became all her

friends, a few of my friends, and some of the neighbors from our apartment on Livingston near Gorham Street I can remember Otto Breitenbach (very close friend of mine) lived about a half-block away. Was he a veteran?

Mark: Was he a veteran by chance?

Cornelius: Yes, Otto was a pilot down in Del Rio, Texas so we had a lot in common.

Mark: Out of curiosity, which fraternity were you in?

Cornelius: Kappa Sigma.

Mark: Is that still there?

Cornelius: Yes

Mark: I used to live off Langdon Street, but I never paid attention really.

Cornelius: Down on the right hand side back by the Tri-Delta House. Or the Kappa Kappa Gammas on the corner?

Mark: No, it's been years.

Cornelius: I think the fraternity was a good thing. It taught there's a lot of different kind of guys in this world and you gotta learn how to get along with them.

Mark: Were there a lot of veterans in the fraternities at the time?

Cornelius: Oh, yea. A lot of veterans. As a matter of fact, when I came back it was like filled with veterans.

Mark: I'm interested to know if you used any of the GI benefits available, for example, the GI Bill for college. Did you finance college by yourself or did you use the

Cornelius: No, I used the GI Bill. It was the only thing I ever used though.

Mark: Did it pretty much cover all of your expenses?

Cornelius: No, but I worked part-time.

Mark: What did you do?

Cornelius: I worked in a clothing store on State Street.

Mark: When it came time to buy a house did you use a VA housing loans?

Cornelius: No, I didn't use it. My first house was in Springfield, Ohio and I think my father-in-law chipped in for that one. I still have the GI insurance, the 10,000 GI insurance. All I used was the academic part of it.

Mark: I just have one last area here. Did you join any veterans' organizations or did you attend reunions?

Cornelius: No, I've never joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars or Vet groups of any kind. I did join this ten bucks a year for the 96th bomb group folder and I didn't do that until about 3 years ago.

Mark: What prompted you to do it at that point in your life?

Cornelius: I don't know. I thought maybe there's somebody - there's something written up about one of my friends that I'd like to hear about. But, at my age, a lot of them are disappearing. There aren't that many guys around.

Mark: Have you gone to any reunions?

Cornelius: Never gone to a reunion. I've threatened to and wanted to, but never did.

Mark: Was it a conscious decision not to join any sort of groups.

Cornelius: No, not conscious, but I just never did. I think it was initially because I was busy trying to get through school, I had a child, married, trying to find my career. I just didn't have time for it and I think as the years went by I got comfortable in my life and I never bothered about it.

Mark: That's pretty much all I had to ask you. Do you have anything else to add?

Cornelius: I think you've covered the basics.