

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Thomas F. Diener  
Ground Crew, Army Air Corps, World War II  
2005

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**Diener, Thomas F.**, (1924-2009), Oral History Interview, 2005

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.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

**Abstract:**

Thomas “Tom” Diener, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native, discusses his experiences in the Army Air Corps with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 2129 Engineering Battalion in Luton, England during World War II. Diener grew up in Milwaukee and graduated from North Division High School in 1943. As a sophomore in high school, he recalls hearing of the bombing of Pearl Harbor while at the Venetian Theater in downtown Milwaukee. Diener, a paperboy, was called to the *Milwaukee Journal* to distribute extras and never got to finish the movie. Diener addresses the pro-war attitudes of the young men in his high school and mentions that Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito “were magnificent anti-heroes” for young men eager to join the service. Diener enlisted in the Army Air Corps in February 1943 but deferred until he graduated high school in June. He discusses at length his basic training in Jefferson Barracks (Missouri) in the sweltering heat. In August 1943, Diener was assigned to East Lansing (Michigan) where he attended classes at Michigan State College in the cadet training program. He mentions there were more women at the college than men, but the cadets were restricted from fraternizing with them. Diener tells how he completed cadet training in November 1943 and was sent to San Antonio (Texas) for mental and physical testing. He states he tested high in radio operator aptitude but chose instead to attend bombardier school with buddies at Lowery Air Corps Base in Denver (Colorado). Diener reports that 50% of soldiers in his class washed out of bombardier school. On New Year’s Eve, Diener was reassigned to Fort Logan (Colorado) to prepare for the 1944 invasion. He describes intensive combat training with Springfield rifles and bayonets, stating: “we became killers...we were supposed to be ready for infantry duty, I guess.” After combat training, Diener was briefly stationed at Fort Dix (New Jersey); he recalls getting a pass to visit New York City to see a Broadway play. Next, he describes the voyage from New Jersey to England on the *Queen Elizabeth*, a luxury liner converted into a troop ship. Diener estimates 10,000 soldiers were on the *Queen Elizabeth*. He reports eating mostly Hershey bars, Oreos, and fruit because the “English chow” was “absolutely terrible.” After landing at a replacement depot in Scotland, Diener took a truck to Luton Air Base (England) where the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force was headquartered. Diener states he remained based there for almost two years. Diener was assigned to the 2129th Engineering Battalion, a small unit of twenty-two men charged with loading and transporting supplies, radios, and leaflets to soldiers on the frontlines. Despite his extensive combat training, Diener notes: “in terms of shooting at anybody, it never happened.” Diener discusses in detail military life, from experiencing air raids while on a pass to London, to socializing and playing darts with English civilians in a Luton pub. Diener compares “buzz bombs” with rockets,

providing a vivid description of watching a rocket fly over Piccadilly Circus. He also outlines the various aircraft he worked with, including: P-38s, B-24s, B-25s, and the British Mosquito, a wooden plane that was difficult to control. Diener recalls a flurry of activity and take-offs just before D-Day, when his unit dropped supplies and leaflets behind the frontlines in Denmark and Holland. Ironically, Diener states he was on leave in London on D-Day itself: "You probably knew about D-Day in America before we knew about it on our base." Diener was still in Luton on V-E Day in May 1945, and he describes bonfires and dancing in the streets. Throughout the interview, Diener returns frequently to themes of rationing, military life, and fraternization with women. Diener characterizes relations between the British and the Americans favorably. He reports all the American G.I.s "went with English girls at the time." Diener briefly dated a Red Cross worker and was best man in two weddings between Air Corpsmen and Englishwomen. Diener tells a romantic story about his friend Jerry Cutro, a Catholic Italian-American, who married Sylvia, a Jewish Englishwoman. After their engagement, Sylvia's parents threw her out of the house and tore up her ration card, which Diener explains was a serious insult. Diener tells how he and Jerry took extra fruit cocktail rations from the Air Corps Base, which was in the process of shutting down after V-E Day, and served fruit cocktail instead of cake at Sylvia and Jerry's wedding. Diener mentions he stayed in touch with the Cutros for over fifty years, that the couple reconciled with Sylvia's parents, and that their mothers eventually became good friends. After V-E Day, Diener was assigned to Wiesbaden Air Base (Germany) where he worked with a European Air Ground unit. He describes Germany positively and mentions he had a chance to travel to Bavaria, Munich, Frankfurt, and Fursten-Felbruch. He was stationed in Berlin for four months before his discharge in 1945. Diener comments that Berlin was a "fascinating city" but was "bombed to hell." He contrasts the destruction in Berlin and London with a furlough he took to Switzerland, stating: "it was the first time we saw city lights in three years." In addition to this tourism, Diener mentions visiting Madam Toussard's Wax Museum and attending a Glen Miller Orchestra concert in London. Diener comments frequently upon rationing in England and the United States. He mentions gas, tires, leather, sugar, cooking supplies, and meat were heavily rationed. This discussion of rationing prompts Diener to comment on the lack of sacrifice among American civilians during the Iraq War and on his dislike of the Hummer SUV. After World War II, Diener attended the University of Wisconsin Extension in Milwaukee for two years before transferring to Milwaukee State Teacher's College. In 1948, he married his high school sweetheart. Diener comments that thanks to the G.I. Bill and his wife's office job, he was able to afford college. He includes his wife's sacrifice in his story, stating: "we were both part of this." Finally, Diener reflects upon how difficult it is for a young soldier to leave his loved ones and go into the unknown; he compares his experience in World War II to the current Iraq War. Diener sums up his experience by stating: "People have a perception that if you were in World War II, you were in battle. It takes about eight or ten people behind the lines to support one person in the frontlines." He says of the G.I. Bill and his chance to go to college: "For my three years of sacrifice, I got four for [education]. I don't know what my life would be like right now if the War hadn't been there."

**Biographical Sketch:**

Diener (1924-2009) was born in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and graduated from North Division High School in 1943. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps and served on the ground crew at Luton Air Base (England) with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 2129 Engineering Battalion. After V-E Day, Diener was stationed at Wiesbaden Air Base and later in Berlin until his discharge in 1946. Following the war, he attended UW Extension in Milwaukee for two years and, in 1948, married his high school sweetheart. Diener then worked his way through Milwaukee State Teacher's College, with financial help from the G.I. Bill and his wife, who worked in an office. Diener graduated in 1950 and taught in Milwaukee until 1966 when he moved to Madison (Wisconsin) and became a junior high supervisor with the Department of Public Instruction. He retired in 1987 after thirty-seven years in the education field. Diener did not join any veterans organizations, but he kept in touch with Air Corps buddies Tom Johnson and Jerry Cutro; Diener had served as best man for each of them in their weddings in England in 1945.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.  
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.  
Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010.

**Interview Transcript:**

John: Today is April 6, 2005. This is John Driscoll. I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, and this is an oral history interview with Thomas Diener. Tom is from Sun Prairie and he is a World War II veteran of the United States Army Air Corps, at the time.

Tom: Yes.

John: Okay. Tom, thanks for agreeing to the interview and for coming down.

Tom: Well, you are quite welcome. Happy to do it.

John: Okay. Can we start at the beginning? When and where were you born?

Tom: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in November 16, 1924. And was a native of Milwaukee, and stayed and educated. I worked until we moved to Madison in 1966. Went to North Division High School in Milwaukee. Graduated from North, and right into the service.

John: From high school?

Tom: Yeah. I had signed up for the Army Air Force Cadet Program and had a deferred enlistment from February until July 5, right after I graduated. Graduated in June.

John: In June of?

Tom: '43. July 5th of '43, I found out what the military was all about.

John: Okay. Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Tom: Yes, I do. I was sitting in the Venetian Theater, on Center Street, about 33rd or 34th, when the movie was interrupted and they announced that we were at war, that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I was still a *Milwaukee Journal* carrier at the time. And they announced that all carriers should report back to their stations, and so I didn't get to see the end of the movie. I hiked back, and we were on the streets selling extras because the war had broke out.

John: I remember the first thing my dad said was, "Where is Pearl Harbor?"

Tom: Yes. Nobody was aware, other than the fact that we knew it was something that belonged to us, and the Japanese had bombed it. It was a pretty different time.

Simply because World War I, we thought, was going to end them all. And all of a sudden we were at war. It had been a long time coming. We knew, ultimately, that we would get into war because of what was happening. We were involved in sending a large amount of war materials over to England. I think the Japanese, for most Americans, the Japanese bombing was a surprise. Although negotiations had been going on for quite a while. And so, here you are in high school, and you're a sophomore, which I was. And all around us, war. My brother had joined the Navy in 1939 and we found suddenly that he was going to be reporting away. My sister-in-law, Eleanore, came up from Corpus Christi, Texas, to live with us because he was on active duty. So that was an introduction. And as the war progressed, a senior in high school, and I was getting fairly good grades, and like all the young people, you are going to be the hero of the age. And I was going to become an Air Force pilot. It was the Army Air Force, or Army Air Corps. There was no Air Force, per se, back then. It was part of the Army. And so I went down and took the test to become a Air Force Cadet and get into the cadet training group.

John: Where did you take the test?

Tom: Took it in Milwaukee. Yeah. And then, that is how I got my deferment. And so from February until my graduation from high school, in June of '43. I was on deferred status. Well, because of the way it was, nobody, no male young man, wanted anything other than to be in the service. If you saw my high school annual, from that year, it is filled with "Off to war," and "We're going to beat Hitler and Mussolini and Hirohito." They were magnificent anti-heros. We could throw darts at them. So it was a very interesting time. And on July 5, the day after the 4th of July, I stood at the, not the train station, the North Shore Station, in Milwaukee. North Shore ran electric trains between Milwaukee and Chicago. Greatest things since...fantastic. Took an hour. Electric train.

John: We used to take it from Great Lakes.

Tom: Yeah. To get to Milwaukee, on leave. Yeah, that was just such a wonderful line, and so quick and so easy. And I had to report to Chicago. I can't remember the name of the place but that is where we were going to be sworn in. I don't recall, I don't think we took any physical while we were there. But we were given kind of an orientation and, hard to remember the dates, but ultimately we were loaded on a train and our train went to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. And if you know anything about St. Louis, in July and August, it is hot. And Jefferson Barracks isn't too far. That is where I took my basic training. And it was hot and miserable but when you're eighteen years old, what do you know? And we had fun, and wonderful guys that we were in the service with. But it really was extremely hot. We'd lay nude in our upper or lower bunks, arms hanging over the side, and the

sweat falling onto the floor from the heat and humidity. It was go out into the exercise field which was typically white stone. And you'd lie down in there with your fatigues underneath you, and when you were done with that, you'd go wash your fatigues because they had turned to cement, practically. From perspiration. And we stayed there until, from July until the end of August, I guess. And we were shipped to Michigan State College where I took my introduction to the cadet training program. College courses. I was in the best physical shape I've ever been in my life, since or before. Everything we did was centered around getting the body fit, and so forth. Very regulated life in the cadet program. And so we were on our way.

John: Where in the state was this?

Tom: East Lansing, Michigan. That's the one. Beautiful. Brand new dormitories. It was one of the most beautiful campuses in the United States at the time because there was so much open space. And lots of grass land. Abbott Hall, that is the hall we were stationed in, was out on the edge of the campus. It was nice because there were not a lot of men and there were a lot of women going to college. But we didn't get to see that because we were very restricted. And we stayed there until, I think it was about mid-October, something like that. And finished our course work, and then we were going to San Antonio, Texas, which was kind of a testing grounds. And there you went through all kinds of mental and physical tests. And it was a determination whether you go on into a pilot program, bombardier, or navigator program, or washed. And unfortunately our class washed about fifty percent of it because there was such an oversupply of pilots at the time. So I am with a couple of guys I really enjoyed being with; a guy from Green Bay and another fellow. And we talked it over. I scored best on the radio operator aptitude test but I chose to go to bombardier school at Lowery Air Force Base, or Army Air Corps Base in Denver, Colorado.

John: Okay.

Tom: And got there, and was there, went through some of the basic stuff. I think it was the week between Christmas and New Years. We were all set to get passes for New Years Eve. And a number of us had a big meeting outside our headquarters company, and they called out the names of a number of people. They said, "You can pick up your passes. The rest of you are restricted to base."

John: Oh, wow. And you were with the ones restricted to base?

Tom: Yeah. And unfortunately the guy from Green Bay had a pass, and I didn't. So our lives changed right there. I became what was sort of Project Z. Project Z was

preparation for the invasion, which was going to take place in 1944. And so all of us went from Lowery Air Force Base to Fort Logan, in Colorado, where we were going to become killers. We had received all kinds of training. Ever shoot a Springfield rifle until your shoulder is so sore because of the kick? We did that. We had bayonet training and in six weeks, we became killers. We were supposed to be ready for infantry duty, I guess. From Fort Logan, we shipped to Camp Dix, or Fort Dix, in New Jersey. And that was our departure point. And we were there for a week or ten days. Got to go into New York on pass. Saw a couple of Broadway shows. And one night, we got the call, "Let's go." We were shipping out at ten o'clock at night. Turn in your duffle bag and what other gear you could handle, and got on a ferry boat that took us out to the ship we were going to go across on. What we didn't know was what that was going to be, but it happened to be the Queen Elizabeth. It became a troop carrier and, if memory serves me correctly, we were part of the largest transport ever on the ship. Almost ten thousand troops. We were three decks below main deck, and I think there was one below us. Guys out on the main deck. One night they slept out on the deck, the next night they traded with the guys that were inside, and they traded places. Just troops all over the place. Took us two hours standing in line to get through the chow line. And the chow was absolutely terrible. It was just ugh! I bought a couple boxes of Oreo cookies, some Hershey almost bars, and every day I would go down for breakfast and get an orange or an apple, and that is all I ate on the trip over there. The food was so rotten. English chow. And, but it only took us six days. No submarine escort. We had an air escort out and then an air escort came out when we were off Scotland. So we docked up in Scotland and didn't know where we were. Really. They told us after a while where we were. Got onto big open semi trailers, open back, on the top, rather. And they took us over to a replacement depot. And I don't know how long we were there, but I was flat broke. I spent all my money buying Hershey bars. But I ended up at a place right out of Luton, Bedfordshire, England. Which was the headquarters company for the 8th Air Force. And that was to be my home for the next two years, about. What happened, when you get to these headquarters companies, they have openings for different people in different organizations. We were assigned to what was called the 2129 Engineering Battalion, which was a crash crew grouping. Only twenty-two guys in our outfit. Fantastic. First night we got there, we stood outside. It was a beautiful, clear night, and we could see the searchlights. The Germans were bombing either near, or in London. We were only three miles from London. You could see the lights pick up a plane. You could see the anti-aircraft stuff going off. And next morning, we awakened, and here we were. Luton was our pass town. When we were on leave, that is the place where we would go. And I wish I could remember the small town we were in. I can't remember it. But we had a wonderful time. I mean, the war, in terms of shooting at anybody, it never happened. The closest I ever came to anything was being in London on pass or I



was in London going to a class for three days when the rockets started coming over.

John: Oh, wow.

Tom: And before that was the buzz bombs. And nobody paid much attention to them. I was standing in Piccadilly Circus, there was an MP, a sergeant, on one side of me and a Piccadilly Commando. If you don't know what that is, those were the girls that worked the streets.

John: Okay, all right.

Tom: On the other side, and we were standing there talking, and watching this bomb go over. And they sounded almost like a putt-putt engine. They were kerosene fired and there was a little tail of flame coming out of them, and when the flame ended, well, that's it. And a little while later you would hear some explosions someplace. The rockets were a different story. They came in high and sirens would go up. But nobody paid any attention because you didn't know where the bombs were going to hit. A lot of them turned around and went right back and hit the place where they were fired from. That is what technology was in those days. But the Germans were really at us. They were the first ones to come out with jet fighters. Now, our base was affiliated with the, I'm trying to think. We flew a lot of night missions out of there in B-24s. B-24s or 25s. And we were dropping radios and stuff behind enemy lines in Denmark and Holland, and those countries, because the invasion was skipping around us. And leaflets were dropped to people telling them what was going on. So it wasn't an active base in terms bombers. We also had Americans were training on the British Mosquito, which was an all-wooden plane. And the reason we had to go through training, if you been through to see it. There was no, the gas tank was in the fuselage of the plane and there were no baffles. So when the plane was taking off, the least little wind, that gas would start to sway in the tanks and they were very hard to control. And we had to stand-by with crash crew trucks all the time. Simply because these planes would, all of a sudden, veer off the runway.

John: Good Lord.

Tom: Yes, it was an interesting time. But they never burned, even though they were all made of wood, you know. So, that was kind of interesting. We also had P-38s fly out. They provided air cover to some of the bomb flights. And I can remember D-Day. I awoke, probably at five in the morning, which is unusual for me. I love to sleep in. And from that time, not one minute of the day was there not a plane in the sky, the sound of planes going back and forth, bomb runs, the whole bit. All

day long. You didn't have to know anything to know something was up. And it took us a long time. You probably knew about it in America before we knew about it on our base. That the invasion had started. It was, I was on pass in London on D-Day. So our base was inactive. All the leaflets and radios and stuff had been dropped, so we weren't playing an active part in it. And it felt very strange, because there were very, very few troops on leave.

John: Sure.

Tom: People would look at you like you were some kind of freak. But it was a glorious day. It was a glorious day for the country. And London, all the time I was there, I never visited the Tower of London, never took any of the, and we went to Madam Toussard's, they had a wax museum. We saw Captain Glen Miller's orchestra play, at one of the, Palladium, or whatever it was called. I still got a program from that at home. And we just, I enjoyed the English people. When we had pass, we'd go into Luton. We had a favorite pub there, and we'd go in and have our half-and-half. And play darts. This is a big, big thing for the English. And Tom Johnson, young guy from South Carolina, he and I became very, very expert at darts. We played for beers. And we won as much as we lost, so that worked out all right. Speaking of Tom, if I may. We all went with English girls at the time. My wife, my present wife, who is my, we weren't engaged or anything when I left for the service, but we had gone together. She was, I guess, she was fourteen. I was fifteen years old when we started to date. So I went with Doris Day, an English girl worked in the Red Cross. And Tom Johnson went with a young woman names Lorna. And ultimately, they married. And I was best man. And I was best man at the wedding. And they, also, one of the other guys, Jerry Cutro, and Jerry was from Elizabeth, New Jersey. Jerry met this young woman at the Glen Miller concert, Sylvia. Of all the unlikely marriages, this was it. Good Catholic Italian boy from New Jersey married an Orthodox Jew from London.

John: Okay.

Tom: Bad news. People today don't know what sacrifice is in terms of our country. Back then, everybody knew, because we all did it. And in England, your ration card was almost like your life. When Sylvia and Jerry announced their marriage, her mother and dad packed her bags, put them out on the sidewalk, and tore up her ration card. Serious business. I was best man at that wedding, too. So we have this Italian from New Jersey, a Jew from London, and a Protestant from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Jerry, being a good Catholic, had to go through I don't know how many dispensations from all over the place in order for this marriage to take place. We went to New Jersey and celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary with them.

John: Oh, that is great.

Tom: Yeah, it was. Not only that, but when the first child was born, it was a boy and the Jewish mother and dad got to see their grandson. That is important. So they went back and Sylvia's father died. Her mother moved to New Jersey and lived with Jerry and Sylvia. And Jerry's father died, and his mother came. They had an addition built onto the house and the two women lived there, together, and became dear friends. So, you know, whatever we think of religion in our life, it is very important, but it doesn't always spell that things are good or bad or indifferent. So it is a fascinating story. Tom is still alive. Jerry is dead. Like all World War II guys, we are going faster than all get out. What is it, a hundred thousand a day?

John: I think it is eleven thousand a day.

Tom: Eleven thousand a day. Yeah, that is unbelievable. We are all getting up there. I'm eighty. And it's, you feel blessed that you are still walking around. Came back, well, let me go on with the story. So, after England, when the war ended, we celebrated in Luton V-E Day. Big celebration. We had bonfires going in the street and people dancing, and all that jazz. And they we started, out little unit, started closing up bases. At this time, Jerry was getting married. We operated the kitchens, we operated the PXs. As we closed bases, everybody was moving out, and so our little unit made sure everything was being closed down properly. And so, every day, Jerry would take the train and go into Luton, or into England—London-- excuse me. With a knapsack full of frozen chicken, big cans of fruit cocktail. That became her wedding cake. They had a huge bowl of fruit cocktail and people just thought that was great. And because they couldn't get anything. Her ration card was gone. So it was fun. And, after that, we shipped over to Germany, and became part of the European Air Ground whatever. And we were stationed, started out in Wiesbaden, and then went to Berlin. And I stayed in Berlin for about four months. Fascinating city. Bombed to hell. Oh, it was just devastating, the bombing. And stayed there until the end of the war. End of the war, I mean to the end of my service. During that period of time, I had the opportunity to take a furlough and we had a choice of what we wanted to do. And I chose to take a ski trip to Switzerland. Never skied in my life. Haven't skied since, I think. And that was fun. I brought a book along to share with you, if you want to keep it. It's Switzerland, it was such a revelation, it was the first time we saw city lights in three years because everything was blacked out. Fantastic candy. Sweets. Switzerland was such a marvelous place to visit. I did go skiing. And became fairly good by the second day. Became so good, I probably got a little overconfident. Going down hill I was swishing, or whatever they call it, and

caught a ski in the snow, and flipped. They didn't have released on skis back then. So I ended up, one ski in the air, one ski on the ground. And wrenched my knee. Had to walk down that mountain. And the snow gets deeper as you go down the hill. By the time I got to the bottom, it was really worse. It was fun. And so that was for seven days. I got to see part of Germany. I went to Fursten-Felbruch, Bavaria, Munich, Frankfurt-am-Main, Wiesbaden is a beautiful city. Went to the opera house and saw some concerts there, and then shipped home on a restored German luxury liner that became a troop ship. Our whole group had shipped out ahead of us so we were on furlough. But we happened to have a sergeant major, first sergeant of our unit along with us. So they pulled all the records, they filled in all the health data. Some of it was not correct, but they did it anyway. And got us on special orders, and we beat the guys home by two days. That worked out.

John: First sergeants know how to do that.

Tom: Oh, yes they do. And they were good guys. And we had fun. We had a case of wine and sat on the drain and had fun. But, getting home was just a joy. Nothing much had changed because we, as a nation, had just sat still for the better part of five years. Rationing was just beginning to go off. And, you know, people today just have no concept of what it was like to live with an automobile that was ten years old. If you could get gas for it, you were lucky.

John: Remember the A, B, C sticker on the windshield?

Tom: Oh, Yeah. And if you had a C sticker, you didn't get much gas for a week. And even though the cars got better mileage than they do now, it didn't get you very far. If you could get tires, and other things. Everything was rationed. And I came back, and I had what was called the 52/20 Club, we called it. For fifty-two weeks, you were entitled to twenty dollars a week, as a veteran.

**[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

John: Okay, there we go.

Tom: Okay, after the 52/20 Club, and it ended for me because I had, the Office of Price Administration had dropped rationing of meat and price controls. You couldn't raise prices on stuff. There was no gouging. And so, when Plankinton Packing started up and going gang-busters in August, they called us up from the unemployment line, I guess, you'd call it. From the 52/20 Club. And I was called to work and I lasted there two weeks. Got into an argument with the boss because we were working twelve hour days and they didn't provide the proper stuff for us to throw into wagons. They didn't have enough wagons. So it ended, and I was

glad of that. And I started at the University of Wisconsin Extension in Milwaukee, in 1946. And stayed there for two years, and transferred to Milwaukee State Teachers College, in 1948, from which I graduated in '50. And went into teaching. Taught in Milwaukee, 1950 to 1966, when I came to Madison as a junior high supervisor with the Department of Public Instruction. And I retired from DPI in 1987, so I spent about thirty-seven years in education.

John: Okay.

Tom: Through all of this, my wife was part of my life, of course. The most important part. And our marriage was in '48. She worked. We always say she helped work my way through college, but without the GI Bill, that would have been a real struggle. I think she was making like seventy-five cents an hour working in an office, and I got, I think I was getting seventy-five dollars a month. I was married. If you were unmarried, you got fifty bucks a month and your tuition and books. I was getting seventy-five dollars a month, out of which we had to pay rent and buy food, and stuff like that. So her seventy-five cents an hour job was important. I also drove cab, worked at department stores, whatever we could to make a buck. But the GI Bill absolutely the second best piece of social legislation. I think Social Security was the best. And I hope that doesn't get tampered with. It was really marvelous for this country and for all the GIs who wanted to take advantage of it. We were able to move forward in our lives. We were able to make a living. Buy homes. We could get, buy cars, we could travel. When I was at the university, teaching, I'm sorry, August was always a good time for us to stop the summer job, which, by the way, was more important than the teaching job because I made more money on it. I worked in the brewery. I'd quit in mid-August and we'd take two weeks vacation. And if you remember back then, polio was epidemic in this country. And I was, at the time, an elementary school teacher. We didn't open our schools for two weeks. Normally we would open like after Labor Day. Elementary schools were closed for two weeks because of the epidemic. When the weather cooled down. So that was always a time for extended travel, if we could. So it was as different time. Going back to the war a little bit, the differences that exist between then and now. I left of July 5th of '43 and never saw my home again for thirty-four months. Never got a pass, never got a telephone card. Nobody paid for anything. And that is different from today. Today they are gone for three months and the world stops. And I can understand it. But it is so different. There is no sacrifice in this country any more like there was back then. It's because it isn't, the wars are so different. It's very hard to compare what is happening now in the Iraq-Iran area to what we were experiencing as a war. We were a united country and we had common enemies. It brought us all together. If young people today had to go through half of what-- but we all did it together.

John: Yeah, that's true.

Tom: And that made a big difference.

John: That's very true.

Tom: Today, shoe rationing because you couldn't get leather, couldn't get cars, couldn't get gasoline if you had a car, couldn't get tires if you had the gas and the car and tires were bad. You couldn't get sugar, you couldn't get cooking stuff. Meat and everything was priced, you could buy so much of that a week. We had it bad, it was worse in England. Because the rationing was really severe over there. So it's different. I wrote a letter to the General Motors Company about the Hummer. We're in a battle for oil and General Motors is pushing this monster that gets, if its lucky, ten miles, twelve miles to a gallon. Worse than that, what made me write the letter, is, I don't know if you ever saw the commercial of this little boy builds a mock-up of a Hummer and enters it into a soap car derby.

John: Oh, Yeah.

Tom: And then cheats by running down the hill. And they glorify that in their commercial. I was so angry. They never answered it. It's a crummy car, and it's an arrogant car in a time like this. But, those are the differences in our life today.

John: What about vets organizations?

Tom: I never joined. No. My father-in-law was great in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. I have never been a joiner, I guess. And I should have, simply because of what the veterans groups did in terms of securing the GI Bill. But I didn't, and I have no regrets about that.

John: Okay. What about staying in touch. Well, you mentioned two fellows.

Tom: Yes, we do. Tom Johnson and Jerry Cutro, Yeah. We communicated, wives communicated regularly. They did. We still hear from Sylvia, we still hear from Lorna and Tom. Tom is having some health problems. He loved golfing and he can't golf any more. But the rest of them, not too much. There were some after the service, we communicated at Christmas a couple of years. One of the good guys I was with, a guy named Armand DeLucca, from Brooklyn, New York, he died a long time ago of heart trouble of some kind. The rest of them, there were only twenty-two guys in our outfit. We didn't have the bonding that comes with battle because we were never there. So it was a little different for us. One other thing, people have a perception that if you were in World War II, you were in battle. It

takes about eight or ten people behind the lines to support one person in the front lines.

John: Absolutely.

Tom: And that is why I was willing to do this oral interview because I didn't have anything to do with it, but what we did was support it.

John: I interviewed a fellow I worked with. And he said he didn't have any stories to tell, and I said, "Jack, you were part of it." And he said, "All I did, I spent the whole war in Indianapolis in the Paymaster's Office." And I said, "But, Jack." And he said, "But, we paid for it."

Tom: He made the sacrifice. We did. And unquestionably, every, in our time, you would have been embarrassed to be seen in the street as a civilian. Because it meant either you found a job that got you out of the service or were 4F. But I don't know how that was handled at home. But none of them, everybody wanted to be in the service and be a part of it. And that was because we were young and that is why war works, because we are young and stupid.

John: That's right.

Tom: It is.

John: A question I usually ask, and you've touched on it several times, but let me ask it anyway. You were young, your whole life was ahead of you, and here, three years just got taken away from you. How do you feel about that?

Tom: I'm going to give you a letter that my wife and I have. Because it tells about both of us, because we were both part of this. It was horrible to be apart for three years but so much has been given back to me, so I gave up something but a lot was given, and that is how I feel. For the sacrifice of every young man that goes to war is horrible. You are separated from family, from loved ones, the unknown. The worst part of these poor guys in Iraq is that we're not at war, and you can't walk down the street with your back to anything because you don't know if you are going to be blown away. That would be horrible. So we never, I don't think there has ever been a time in our life together when we talk about what might have been. For example, when I left to go in the service, I had no idea under the sun that I would ever go to college.

John: Okay.

Tom: It was not, I mean, the war was such a part of our life, we thought we were going to graduate and you are going into the service. Then, when it ended, I found out this gift had been handed to me. For my three years of sacrifice, I got four for that. I started my master's program under the GI Bill. So, yeah, I got a lot back. I don't know what my life would be like right now if the war hadn't been there.

John: Yeah.

Tom: I think I would have still married the same girl but I'd be working in a factory. I don't know. It was not part of our consciousness, I guess, to be thinking three years hence, four years hence. And when we got back, we were so happy to be back and get on with your life, I don't think we thought much about it. That's a good question.

John: Well, I've done, I've talked to maybe a hundred veterans so far, and nobody is angry about it. It cost a lot but they were all willing to do it. And that is the thing, you know?

Tom: Yeah.

John: That is the thing.

Tom: I don't know if they have much the same expression I've given about today and back then.

John: Oh, Yeah.

Tom: Some of the anger is with the way our veterans are treated by this country. I see all these support our troops stuff around, and I think people do, but only nominally. Putting a magnet on your car. Giving up six months or a year of your life to go over to that situation, six months in the desert with the bugs and the sand and the living conditions, and having to wear all that heavy equipment when it is a hundred degrees, and never knowing when somebody is going to step out of a doorway and blow you apart, or a car is going to. It's horrible. I don't like Rush Limbaugh at all. Not even a tiny little bit. And yet he had a thing on, I got a copy of the e-mail, where he talked about the victims of 9/11 are getting millions of dollars settlements, he said, when a veteran is killed in Vietnam, the first thing happens is the surviving spouse gets a thousand dollars. And I guess there is another insurance payment. But whatever it is. But it is nothing. And these are the ones making the ultimate sacrifice.

John: Yeah.



Tom: I am sure if any of the people from the Towers had been given a choice, they would have chosen not to be there. I am sure anyone that is in Iraq right now is there because ninety percent want to be there to serve their country. And I think they are being treated like crud by this country. I really do. And that is okay. Politicians have to live with it, I guess. If they can live with it. It doesn't make any difference to them. This country is going to hell in a hand box. I hope you got that on the tape.

John: Well, this is a remarkable story. I have a friend who passed away, Stephen Ambrose, the writer, and he was giving a talk to some vets at the Historical Society, and he, a lot of the guys were saying, "I didn't do much." And he said, "Would you all stand up?" And these guys stood up. And this guy, he was a showman. He was a great writer. And he said, "You were giants." And they kind of looked. And he said, "You went out and saved this world."

Tom: Well, that was our intent.

John: And the guys who hit the beach on D-Day, and the guys on the crash crew, the guy in the paymaster's department in Indianapolis, that was all part of that effort that really.

Tom: I have a dear friend in Milwaukee who got in the service, probably toward the tag end of the war, and ended up on an island in the Pacific and was going to be part of the invasion force in Japan. And God bless Harry Truman. Toughest decision ever made.

John: That invasion would have cost us a million men. I would have cost the Japanese many, many, many times more.

Tom: Absolutely. And so it was, I don't think anyone wanted to live with what Harry Truman did. He was great. He had the courage to fire MacArthur and it took courage to drop that bomb.

John: There is a photograph of Truman and MacArthur, and Truman has got his hand, he was short, and up here, and the caption the added was, "You're fired." Well, this is a great story. I am going to wrap this up, okay?

Tom: Okay.

**[End of Interview]**