

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMES EDSALL

U. S. Army Air Force and Royal Canadian Air Force Pilot, World War II

1996

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Edsall, James V., (1920-). Oral History Interview,
User Copy, 1 sound cassette (50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master Copy, 1 sound cassette (50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

James Edsall, a Middleton, Wis. resident, discusses his World War II service as a pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force and the United States Air Force. He relates joining the Royal Canadian Air Force after the U.S. Air Force rejected him, training in Canada, and voyage to England aboard the Queen Elizabeth. Once in England he became part of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and comments on training at Ramsbury (England), spending a week as an inmate at Desitt RAF prison, resentment from the English, and developing friendships with other RAF members. He mentions his duties including laying mines in the Bay of Biscay, dropping propaganda, and flying weather reconnaissance. Edsall transferred to the American Air Force in 1943, he talks about the transfer process, instruction courses at Waco (Texas), duty at Lecce (Italy) and the twenty missions he flew from there. Edsall compares the American Air Force with the RAF, touching upon differences in discipline, tactics, strategy, and flight formations. He relates his flight home from Europe, use of the GI Bill, treatment of veterans by the University of Illinois, service related medical problems, and brief involvement in the AMVETS.

Biographical Sketch

Edsall (1920-) served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, Royal Air Force, and the 15th U.S. Air Force (420) during World War II. He was honorably discharged from service, and achieved the rank of First Lieutenant.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2002.

Transcription edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay, today's date is June 6, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. James Edsall, presently of Middleton, Wisconsin. I almost said Madison. I've got to get that distinction. So we can tell the difference. A veteran of the Army Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War. Good morning and thanks for coming in.

Edsall: Fine. Thanks for having me.

Mark: No problem. Let's start at the top, as they say. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised? And what you were doing prior to the outbreak of World War II?

Edsall: Well, I was born in Greenville, Michigan, in 1920. And lived there until I joined the Canadian Air Force. I went to Western Michigan a year before I joined the RCAF.

Mark: Now, as a young American, I mean, we didn't enter the war until the very end of 1941. Something prompted you to go to Canada and join the Air Force, and go to war when you really didn't have to. Was it some sort of commitment to anti-Fascism, was it just the desire to go fly airplanes? What was it that possessed you to take this extra step, really?

Edsall: Well, a couple of things, I suppose. Or maybe it is more. But, in any case, in the latter part of 1940, I was probably — I was trying to get into the American Air Force. I had what they call a deviated septum, which is the nose. And it is supposed to affect your breathing, which it does. And therefore I was not accepted. We were not in the war yet. We weren't desperate for people at that time. And so they turned me down. So, I ended up over in Windsor, Canada, and they put me in a decompression chamber, sent me up to twenty thousand, or something like this, or back and forth a couple or three times. Found out that it was not too defective, in the sense of interfering with your breathing that much. So, they accepted me. I suppose that really was one of the main reasons I went over. I wanted to fly. I wanted to be a pilot. And if I couldn't get in the American Air Force, why, the RCAF. I was not alone. There were fifty thousand of us.

Mark: Yea, there were quite a few.

- Edsall: Yea. We used to call it the Royal Texan Air Force.
- Mark: So, when you joined the Canadian Air Force, what sort of induction steps did you have to go through, and, being a foreigner, were there little extra things that you had to deal with?
- Edsall: They put you through not a very strange or rigorous medical. They were more concerned about your depth perception than most anything else. This means that they had a ruler with a slide, and some little prints on it, and they'd move it up till your eyes crossed. I had a kind of little problem because my eyes wouldn't cross as fast as they were supposed to and, as a result, I went through about two weeks practicing this. They told me to go back with a little folding match box and practice crossing my eyes. And, eventually, of course, I did. And we joined up after that. They also kind of told us to stay away from alcohol for a while.
- Mark: Not bad advice, probably.
- Edsall: No, it wasn't bad advice.
- Mark: So, as a foreigner, were there any sort of special steps you had to go through? And I am also interested in what the view would have been from the American government's side.
- Edsall: No, obviously, isn't involved in the draft at that time. But it was fairly early, of course. And all I had to do was tell them I that I was already in the service. Which I was, by that time. And they, as far as the Canadian government was concerned, we were signed up as soldiers of fortune. And therefore didn't have the insurance they gave the other native pilots.
- Mark: So, what sort of training did you go through. I mean, I'd imagine you'd have to go to a base and learn how to fly a plane, and learn how to wear the uniform, and that sort of thing. Why don't you just walk me through that process of getting you trained to be a pilot.
- Edsall: Okay. The first thing they did was to put us in what they called security training. And you—security guard, really, is what it amounted to. They put us down in a place called Jarvis. It was an air force station. They had, God, I can't remember the name, the planes they had. But it was an early combat plane. And we were taking rides there, so you would have the feel of it. But we also did guard duty there. We were there for probably a month or so, doing that. Then we went up to a ground school, in Belleville, which is up near Kingston, and just across the border

from New York. Right on the river, as a matter of fact, on Lake Erie, I guess. Anyway, we did ground training there. You did your navigation, your identification plan, planes, and Morse code. And at that time, well, as a matter of fact, all of the time that I was in the service, you were on either a Q-code, or code nets. Rather than contact with the aids you have today, with navigational. And after you left ground school, you went to elementary flying school. That was at Godrich. That was on Lake Huron. And flew Tiger Moths out of there. Little bi-plane. Actually, it was, towards the end of World War I, they had them. My chief flying instructor out there, being the CO, was an old Royal Flying Corps flier. And, God, could he handle one of those planes. He was really tremendous. But he also used to get up in the morning and file his teeth so he could bite your fanny a little bit hard. But, in any case, after you soloed, you either soloed before ten hours or they sent you out to some other part of the air force. Usually a navigators or bombardiers. I think I soloed at about eight hours. I can remember that solo because the instructor that took me up brought me in and I came down and I made a rather rough landing. And he got out and said — we had stopped on the — they were grass runways — and we stopped right in the middle of the runway. And he turned around to me and says, “Do you think you ought to be soloed?” And I said, “Well, I’m not sure. I’m not the instructor.” He says, “Well, I had my doubts, but, damn it, we need you. So, you go up and take a couple of runs and if I’m still standing here when you come down, taxi in. If not, go up and make another circuit.” And that was my solo. After we did that for, I can’t remember how long I was there, but I suppose, probably a month or month and a half, maybe two months, I can’t remember, really. We went on down to advanced flying and that was on those Blenheims — not Blenheims — Hansons. They were bomber planes in the early stages of the war that were not longer were used. And we went through navigation, solo flights, and you did a buddy flight with another pilot who acted as your navigator, and you did the same thing for him. And this sort of thing. And after about, I think, maybe about two months, you graduated and got your wings. Then after you did that, well, they just shipped you out. Went to England.

Mark: In your training, were there other Americans with you? I mean, as you mentioned, there were many other Americans who went up there, and, in your particular experience, there were other Americans that you trained with?

Edsall: Oh, yea. Yea. There were probably, I would say, a third of the class were Americans. The rest of them were Canadians. Several of the Canadian friends I still have contact with, off and on. I don’t think any of the American ones I was with, if they’re still alive, I’ve had contact with, even since the war.

Mark: Did you get treated differently because you were Americans? Were they a little

harder on you? Or were they so glad to have you that, maybe, they were a little easier on you? Or wasn't there any difference at all?

Edsall: No, I couldn't, I wouldn't say there was any difference other than the fact that, well, your buddies treated you a little different, because we could go over across the border and get cigarettes. And we used to come back. We had them wired underneath the car, and everything else, and we'd get to customs. And, of course, Canadian customs, they were concerned about this. The guy said to me one time, we had seventy-five cartons of cigarettes all wired all over the God-darned car, and he said, "Well, I know you got a bunch of cigarettes in there," but, he said, "The boys need it, don't they?" And I said, "Jesus, get the hell out of here." So they, really, treated us very well. Nah, there wasn't really very little difference. I had relatives in Canada, as well, so, I guess, while I was not really very close to the, I visited them several times while I was up there. But that didn't probably make any difference.

Mark: And, so, by the end of 1941, then, you were in England?

Edsall: Yea.

Mark: Why don't you describe your trip over there, and how you got organized, and what you were doing prior to your first combat mission?

Edsall: Yea. I think, I can't quite remember when we left, but we went over on the Queen Elizabeth. Which is one of the biggest ships.

Mark: Out of Montreal, or Quebec, or somewhere?

Edsall: And it was not with a convoy. They went alone because the convoy slowed them down. And they would hold, on board, something in the neighborhood of like four or five thousand of us. And they had stripped it, and you were very crowded. And lot of us slept on deck because it was more comfortable sometimes. And you even volunteered for guard duty, so you could get on deck more often. We landed up in Greenwich, Scotland, after, I think, it took us about seven days, and we only had I think only two submarine scares while on the way over. And they just outran them, I suspect. We were all put in life preservers and a few things like that. But they had rather unsanitary conditions on there.

Mark: On the ship?

Edsall: On the ship, yea. It was done in a hurry, and so your mess was way down in the bowels of the ship. And you had the typical fold-up dishes, and this sort of thing.

Silverware all went in it. And when you went, after you ate, you just dipped them in about four different big containers that had disinfectants, and some sort of thing. I got trench-mouth. I got it so bad I could wiggle every tooth in my mouth. And when I got over there, the first thing I did was go to the doctors, and they gave you shots between each tooth. But I, for the last two or three days, I just shut down. The only thing I could eat was candy bars. Because I could melt them in my mouth. And it was pretty uncomfortable. But, it was an exciting, because, you know, first time I had ever been over in Europe. We landed up in Greenwich, Scotland. Not Greenwich, Glasgow, it was, where we landed. The first of the port, or something. They had no dock there that could take the Queen Elizabeth. They took us off in lighters. And we caught trains there and went down to Bournemouth, which was kind of an induction center for us. We spent, oh, a couple of weeks there going through physicals and exams of this nature, and finally, they assigned you. And they assigned us originally what they called a climatization course. It was again Tiger Moths, just a bi-plane. They were two-seaters. And you carried a navigator while you were climatizing. He was also going through training. It's quite different flying over England than over Canada.

Mark: How's that?

Edsall: Well, everything runs together. Communities from the air are a little difficult to, and roads, and things like that, are a little difficult to identify. So, they had a system map that they taught us there but they had a system called Pandit's Knock Light Switch. If you were flying at night, which most of the flying over there was then was at night, was your navigational system once you hit England. That period in the Tiger Moth area was kind of boring in the sense that you had already learned to fly, and things, and all you were doing was learning how to fly over England. And, as a result, we did a little aerobatics, and things like that. They were kind of illegal for then. And I had a navigator that had some false teeth. And we were doing what they call a slow roll, which goes up, and you hit the top of it, and you kind of stutter there for a while and complete it. And, being upside down, he lost his teeth. And going in to report it, and this, and everything, it finally got up to the C. O., and I got put for a week on Desitt. It's a station away from the one we were on. And you went in, and it was like you were in jail. It was really a cell. There was no jail. And they gave you, like, ten or twenty minutes in the morning to shave, get cleaned, and get ready to go. And then they ran for the rest of the day. You ran to everything. Even when you were scrubbing floors, what you did, you did it double-time. At the end of the week, you really were ready to get out of there. My roommate that lived up there was a commander. That's not the right term. Any way, he was an officer, and he was in for about the same thing I was. He was doing some illegal flying. But when we left there, they assigned you to a combat station.

Mark: And yours was where?

Edsall: This was at Ramsbury. Matter of fact, I had, across the way from us, an American station, much before we were really in the war. We had troops over there that were doing observation. These guys were, if I can believe what they told me, and I think I can, they did some combat missions before we were in it.

Mark: Over Germany? Or, in defense of—

Edsall: No, usually over France, and doing observations rather than any real bombing, or anything.

Mark: They had planes? It was an American Air Force detachment?

Edsall: Let's see. They had some P-38s. They had, oh, boy, you know, when you get my age, your memory starts to really fail, and this is fifty-some odd years ago. So, anyway, we used to land over there because we could get a good mess over there.

Mark: Now, where is Ramsbury, geographically?

Edsall: It's in the Midlands. Sweddon, probably north and a little east of Sweddon. It's not far from Oxford. Probably, an hour away from Oxford. And out of London, it's north and west. But it is in the Midlands.

Mark: Yea. So, as an American — Americans don't always understand the relationship between the British Military and the sort of military forces of the Commonwealth. And I have to admit I don't understand them, either. Why don't you describe the relationship between the Royal Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force, and that sort of thing. Just to sort of get the command structure established.

Edsall: The RCAF — which is the Royal Canadian Air Force — and the RAF — which is the Royal Air Force — once we got to England, we became RAF members. And the command was mixed. Some of my C. O.'s over a period of time were Canadians. One I remember most was a chaplain, from Toronto. And he was head of all the chaplains in England. At one time, at the time I knew him. We lost a good friend there. He had a crash and was dead. And then Tom Donnelly and myself, Tom was a Catholic, I was a Protestant. But we went into Ramsbury to get a mass said for him, and the priest that came out to talk to us turned to me, and wanted to know what denomination I was. And I told him I was a Unitarian. And he turned his back on me. So I was upset about that. And Donnelly had to do all the negotiations, and what not, and talking to him about it. But we did get a mass

said David. Then anyway, during that, after we had been transferring back to the American Air Force, we were down in London for quite a long time before we were finally transferred. And I wanted to, I guess, let the chaplain know I was unhappy with the Catholic religion. And so we went in to see him. Now, this guy, this chaplain, had come up for the funeral, when the burial of David. His name was David Benson. And when he came up, he got our names. He shook hands with us, and that. And he did the service. And he had to leave. He was a busy man. So Tom and I decided to go in and see him. And we were staying at the Red Cross club. So we went over and he had a male secretary, a corporal, sitting outside his office. And we gave him his name, and he just turned around and yelled through an open door, and said, "Father, there are two service men in here to see you." He said, "Send them in." So, we walked in. And he got up and said, "Hello, Jim." "Hi, Tom." How he remembered us, I don't know. Because he saw thousands of them, I'm sure. But the other nice thing he did, although my mother was a Protestant, and a rather strong one, he wrote her a letter and said I had been in to see him. And that was fine. Which I thought was pretty nice. So I corresponded with him for a long time, afterwards. He is now dead. That was a wonderful experience. I've often said, of all the religions, if the Catholic religion was that concerned about me, I'd have joined them. But, he was very helpful in getting us over, kind of, the death. The one nice thing you find later on is that you don't make a terrible lot of close friends. At least I didn't. It hurts too much.

Mark: In a war-time situation, you mean?

Edsall: Yea. Oh, yea. But, it hurts too much to lose them. Anyway, after that, I was really assigned to Wellingtons. The bases names, I'm missing. We were in a base up in Scotland for a while and we did just weather reconnaissance out of there. And until they needed somebody for laying mines in the Bay of Biscay. We did that a few times. We did one, really only one, mission over Germany, and that was a propaganda mission. We went over with a bunch of paper aboard and dropped it out of the bomb bay on this town. By that time, the Germans were concerned about a lot of other things and not quite as much about the kind of remote bombing or the propaganda bits that we were doing. And they knew what we were doing all the time, as we knew what they were doing. The intelligence was pretty damned good. They broke the German code well during the early parts of the war. As they did the Japanese.

Mark: In terms of life in England, I would imagine there were some sort of adjustments you had to make, culturally. I mean, it is similar. They speak the same language. What's the phrase, "Two people separated by a common language." There is much familiar, and there is much different. Were there any sorts of—

Edsall: Not particularly. There were, occasionally, because once they found you were a Yank, and we wore a USA on our shoulder patch, we really weren't, and didn't deserve them, but we wore two sets of wings. A USA wing and an RAF wing. And so they knew. We made no secret that we were not Canadians, or English. And on some occasions, oh, when we used to take leaves down in Bournemouth, we'd find people who were really resentful of us, particularly after the US Army and Air Force had been over there for a while. They weren't as resentful of our conduct, so much, as the fact that the US boys had more money. When we went over, the Canadians paid us better. Not all that better, they gave us \$30 a week, or something like that. But, the RAF wasn't paid as well. So, we had to leave an amount of it back in the camp. Our pay was equal to the RAF while we were over there. And, of course, the US boys came in with, they had a lot more money than that. And they threw it around a lot. And so there was some resentment, in that respect. But, not so that it hurt too much. Occasionally, you got somebody who kind of gave you the thumb. That sort of thing. Not often. No, there really wasn't—matter of fact, I took a leave in Scotland, at Edinburgh. And had a most delightful time up there. A family took us in, took us all over Edinburgh, out in the country in Scotland. Same way, actually, down in the southern part of England. And in Ramsbury, the little town that we were in, we used to have a kind of a competition between the commandos and us. Because, we were from a different branch of the service. But, other than who got there first, and got the table at the local pub, that was about all of it.

Mark: So, when Pearl Harbor happened, you were in the Royal Air Force, in England. Do you recall how that incident happened, and how did that change your military service and war career?

Edsall: Not much. At the moment it happened, nothing. Other than the fact that — looking back, and this may have been not as true as I think it is, but, looking back, we knew the US was going to get into it. There wasn't any way they could stay out of it. But, the Japanese, the Pacific War, was a big surprise. And they attacked us. I don't think it really made much effect on us for the first couple or three years, and after, I guess it was around the beginning or pretty close to '43, we got an opportunity to transfer back to the American Air Force.

Mark: And you took it?

Edsall: Oh, yea.

Mark: For what reasons?

Edsall: Because I was a little bit scared of combat. Not a little. I was hellish scared. They

didn't have, like the American Air Force, so many missions and then you got moved. When, you lost fifty percent of your squadron, they gave you an opportunity to go and teach ground school for six months, or you could go and train on another plane, and go back to combat. I wanted to fly a Mosquito, so I went over and got six hours in a Mosquito when this thing came through and said you can transfer. When you find out they are shooting real bullets, and you lose a few. We only had, I think, three for four guys that were shot up before we could have been transferred. And they knew that was going to happen. That's how I got six hours in the Mosquito.

Mark: So, you transferred into the U. S. Air Force, in 1943. Why don't you just walk me through that process as to where you changed uniforms.

Edsall: Yea. Well, when the opportunity came, you had to resign — not really resign — you had to make arrangements with your base, and sign a paper that you are going to transfer. So they just sent you down to London. You were still in the RAF. Matter of fact, you went in every week and got your pay. But it wasn't very much. By the way, we were staying at the Red Cross club, which was like twenty-five cents a day. And catching food wherever you could. And, again, the people were tremendous to us there. They'd invite you to their homes. The staff, I'd say, of the Red Cross club, were all English, and they'd invite you to their homes, and this kind of thing. And the Red Cross club had inexpensive foods. You could eat there, too. But, once you gave your notice you were going to transfer, they sent you down there and then you either went through the process of being accepted by the American services, and that took, oh, gosh, a couple of months, it seems to me, as I recall.

Mark: Now, was this a mere formality, or were there some who were rejected, for American service?

Edsall: Well, they were having troubles. At the time when I was in the RAF, I was a sergeant pilot. Not an officer. And most of us were. The officers group was a small percentage of your graduating class. They didn't have a sergeant pilot in the American Air Force. And so, what they were trying to do, was to promote you up to either a second lieutenant or a pilot officer. That was like a warrant officer, sort of. But about that time there came an order across that there would be no promotions in the ETO. They had held them back, anyway. So, they didn't know what the heck to do. And that is why we were there, if we were in London, for well over a month. Waiting for our orders to go places. We were sent from there, as staff sergeants, yea, as staff sergeants, they finally transferred us to staff sergeants. And then they sent us up to Charley, which was a processing center for incoming pilots as well as guys going back home that had completed their tour.

And we were up there for, I guess, probably another month or so. And when that order of no more promotions turned over, they sent us back down to London and said, "Here's your allotment. Get your uniforms and this sort of thing. God, I went over to Bond Street and I had fittings for, you know, a flight jacket, it was, I had a new raincoat made in Esser [unintelligible]. We had hats made, all tailor made, beautiful. And all of a sudden, they came through with an order that said, no, pay off your tailor and get the hell out of here, and go. So all of us left without that. And I came back a staff sergeant. They didn't promote us. We got back to the States and when we got down to Miami, again being processed in, they then gave us our commissions and sent us out from there.

Mark: You went to Italy?

Edsall: Yea. After I got back, in '43, we went through the process fairly rapidly. And that gave me time to get married. But, other than that, I went to Randolph Field and from Randolph up to Waco, and I was instructing on instruments for a couple or three months. And Don McKenna and I both instructed on them. About that time, a bunch of our guys, fellows we had been flying combat with, were coming through. They had transferred after we had. And people we knew were some of our students. And this was kind of silly. But that was the case. I don't know if this really caused it, but Don McKenna was a great golfer. He was one of the hardest hitting amateurs in the United States at one time. He was the champion out at Nakoma for, I don't know, for a number of years. He was a great golfer. And we used to play a lot of gold down there at Waco. They had some golf courses. And they came out on the course one day and they said, "Hey, you got to report back. They are shipping you out." So we went back and they did, they shipped us out to March Field, on 24s.

Mark: That is in California?

Edsall: Yea. And Don and I and my wife drove all the way out there. And the dog. And we'd both flew 24s. Went through that bit. And Don got a chance — I don't know if this is an interesting story or not — but Don and I used to play a lot of golf out there, too. And there was a major and a captain that made up the foursome with us. And they always wanted to play for a little money. And we were into their pocket pretty heavy, because I was not a good golfer. But Don was an excellent golfer. And, we were into it pretty hefty, and all of a sudden, we got shipped out before the rest of the crews did. So, we never collected. So we never knew whether that was the cause, or not. But Don maneuvered some way, and was shipped out down to do some training on B-29s. I went on and joined a crew out at March Field, and after being there for I suppose a month or so, or I suppose it was longer than that. I can't remember how long. But, it was relatively a short

time, you'd pick up your crew and get oriented with that. And I went out as a co-pilot, with that crew. To Italy. And when they had a shortage or two, they'd pull co-pilots off and stick them with a crew, and take a new guy and make him take your place, and that sort of thing. So, we flew about twenty missions out of there.

Mark: Out of where?

Edsall: Lecce. Well, you know how the boot is? This was almost down at the foot of the boot, just up. And we flew there until just prior to the end of the European war. And, you know, the other day, I was trying to remember some of the things. I remember the name of the station. They shipped us out of Lecce and closed the station down. And I can remember the name of it, and, now, I can't remember to save my neck. In any case, we ended up doing only about two missions out of there, and the war really broke. But before we left Lecce, we knew the war was over. Every time you went on a mission, you came back and went through the intelligence group, what do they call it now?

Mark: Debriefing?

Edsall: They debriefed you. And you told them what you saw, this or anything, and they kept a huge map of the movements of the Russians and us, so we knew the war was over.

Mark: So, these two missions you flew with the American Air Force weren't nearly as harrowing as some of the missions—

Edsall: Well, the twenty missions, we did out of Italy, were all U. S. force, fifteen, and it was the old — I want to say 220th, but it was Killer Kane's old squadron. One of the chief navigators in our squadron was the navigator for Killer Kane when they did the Ploesti oil raids. He used to tell the story about going in so low that farmers stood in the fields throwing stones at them. But, in any case, when we went up there to do those last two missions, we thought we were just going up there to transfer back to the States. But that wasn't the case. We had a — a horse's neck — who was a West Pointer, and he needed some medals. And so, we flew two missions out of there, both of them useless. The first one was up around Lechua, which we had bombed, flattened the darn place. And the second one, it was headed up towards the Po Valley. And the cloud formation was so heavy that something like sixty percent of the squadron aborted and came home, including us. This guy was trying to weave us in through this cloud cover. My God, I couldn't see, and the planes are on your wing. And so, hell, everybody just aborted and came back. I think he finally hit the target with like four or five planes, or one box, I'm not sure. And he came back bragging to beat hell about it.

And one of the younger officers, well, he wasn't young. No, he was an old timer, had combat. He told him to bugger off, and they got into a hell of a battle, and he threw him out through the window. But, that was the last I saw of him. We shipped out shortly after. But the war ended while we were there.

Mark: I'm interested to hear your comparison of the Royal Air Force and the American Air Force. I imagine some things are the same, some things are going to be different. The war, of course, the nature of war had changed. But, just in terms of your general impressions, how was the American Air Force different than the Royal Air Force? In terms of discipline, and—

Edsall: Well, I would say the discipline was a little different. I don't know if it was any more successful in the sense of, you remember or were you just too younger to remember Terry and the Pirates?

Mark: No, I don't remember that.

Edsall: It was a cartoon. Well, the guy that was Terry wore a combat hat all crumpled up. So we used to put them in, we'd take our grommets out and sleep on them. Now, you know, we wanted them like that. And that was strictly against regulations. And they used to have kind of a tough time about that, but, again, inspections. Down in Waco, Texas, at the time, I can remember the C. O. coming by and flipping the back of my head, saying, "Get that hat changed." But nobody ever followed up. The discipline was a little more formal than it was in the Canadian. But that was a different period of the war. And they weren't so hungry at that time for replacements, and that sort of thing. And at the time that we were going through training in the RAF, they were desperate for people.

Mark: What about tactics, and strategy, and that sort of thing?

Edsall: That was quite different. American Air Force didn't do many night missions. In Europe. And you did fly reasonably close formation. Flying close formation in a 24 is kind of slippery. But the English, during the period that they were bombing Germany, flew in very loose formations. Because there, of course, it was night, and they felt that flak was a little more difficult. To bring them down. The Germans, at that time, probably were not doing the kind of flak coverage that they did later down in Italy. Down in Italy, they put their — coming out of Italy, they put their tracking guns out on the outskirts, for instance, in Vienna. When you came in, they threw up a barrage. And that barrage would be like covering a couple of city blocks. And to spare. And you flew through it. There wasn't any way you were going to circumvent it. Oh, one of the missions we came back from, in Italy, we had a hundred and twenty-one flak holes in the plane. I still got a piece

of the flak went through the scarf I had on my neck. Embedded in the insulation, up in the roof. That was quite different. The coverage that we had on those bomb missions were quite different, too. Although the kind of missions I flew out of England were not the typical mission. Because we were doing weather and laying a few mines, and things. And in a formation type of thing, the coverage by planes — single engines — were very limited because their range was limited. Out of Italy, we usually had, they flew coverage for us, overhead, and there was a group that went ahead of us, in single engines. They laid out chaff, which was supposed to, then, take care of the radar. That's why the Germans moved out their tracking guns, out to the outskirts, so that they could use them. And the Germans did have both out across England and out across Germany, the north part, and the southern parts, they had their German AA, which was a hell of a good gun. It just was a... They used it as an anti-tank gun. They used it as an anti-aircraft gun. Well, at that time, that was unheard of. The only other gun that came close was the ones that they had on ships, the Bofors, which shot pretty rapidly. But without the range the 88 had. The 88 was a great gun. By the way, I spotted the first, or maybe the only f-lighter in the Channel on one of our missions.

Mark: Really?

Edsall: Yea. The Germans had two barges with a bridge built between them, and then an 88 mounted on the bridge. And they towed it behind a battleship or a merchant, mostly merchant, ships

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

Mark: So, when the war ended, and Germany surrendered, do you recall V-E Day, and what was the sequence? Because there was still war going on in Asia. I'm wondering how that affected—

Edsall: Yea, other than the fact that, see, the kind of information that we were able to get from the newspapers was very limited. About the Pacific. They weren't interested in the Pacific. So everything we got in intelligence were rumors, and that sort of thing. But, we weren't particularly concerned at that time about — they were starting to transfer groups from our wing, from that to the Pacific. And we were a little concerned about that. You were worried about whether you were going to be sent out to the Pacific. I had a pineal cyst, otherwise I'd have been in the Pacific earlier. Would have been in the Pacific rather than going to Italy. But they were scared of infection. And it's a running sore in the back. It's congenital, but — they finally operated on it. But that kept me out of the Pacific, for a bit. Anyway, when the war ended in Europe, I guess we probably had known it was going to end at least a week to two weeks ahead of time, maybe three weeks. Before I left Lecce

we were pretty sure it was over. The Russians were coming down, in through, coming south. And we were moving there, our armies were moving, so it was pretty obvious that it was going to be. But we were still flying missions, so we were a little concerned. I can remember the night that we got word of it because we had — you had to take care of all of the .45s that we were issued, for each member, crew member had a .45 when you went on a mission. And you picked them up and brought them back. We loaded every one of them, stuck them on the bunks, called our guys in and each grabbed their own, and we went outside and shot them in the air. I had a German machine pistol at the time. I did a little with that. The place was a nut-house for a couple or three hours.

Mark: Was it very long before you got back to the States?

Edsall: No, it wasn't too long. Let's see. We went from there a field I can't remember the name of — to there now, what the hell did we, oh, Joya Georgia, I guess. Jesus, I wrote that down someplace. Anyway, we went to Joya and we had, there was a processing station where you picked up a ship, another 24, and flew it home. And they had, literally, just acres of brand new, never — other than flown over — 24s out there. So, what did they give us? We got the ship we flew our last mission in. And we stripped it. They have — we used to call it the flying coffin — it was an armor plating, built like a coffin that surrounded the pilot and co-pilot's seat. And we used to have to cable them back because if you had to crash land or anything, why that would pin you right to the dashboard. Instrument board. So we stripped those things out of it. Plus anything that we could get rid of that would add weight. They wouldn't let us strip the guns. So, we still had those aboard, and when we got our orders, we were sent from there to Natal, down through — right in the middle of the desert. Sahara Desert. We went from Joya to that middle of the desert station, and from there to Dakar. And from Dakar to Natal. And then Natal to Puerto Rico. And then to Georgia where they took the planes over, and we were processed there. Going across from Dakar to Natal, we lost an engine. And, fortunately, they had assigned, our crew had changed quite a bit by that time. Some of the guys were already gone home, and some of them weren't. But they assigned us a navigator, a young guy who had not flown any combat missions but was smarter than hell. And he spent hours in that hot sun up in his dome taking shots, sun shots, some things like that. And they had warned us that, when we were coming from Dakar to Natal, you start hitting the South American coast line, you will get a radio interference and your radio compass will probably tell you to head north when you ought to head south, and this sort of thing. So we had to depend on the navigator and we hit South America at about fifteen hundred feet. We were losing, we had thrown everything. We stripped that plane of everything. I even had an accordion that I had traded a guy with, and we threw that overboard. We threw everything we could throw overboard that had any weight to it. And we

were losing altitude, and there were storm clouds. And this sort of thing you don't like to fly through. Which we had to, because we just couldn't do it. But when we hit the coast, our navigator says, "I know what your radio compass is saying, but head south. That is where we're going to make it." But we made Natal, at fifteen hundred feet. And we came right in. We didn't do any circuits. No approach. We just came in. Shots, and Very pistols out, and so that they cleared the field for us. And we lucked there. And then we went up to Georgetown. Just a place, a base about a day's trip from Georgetown by river. We had an American base. It was cut out of the jungle. We lost a plane going up on that in the Amazon area, just north of it, as a matter of fact. Not too far from the base. They cut in and got the crew out. And cut their way back out. That jungle was something down there. But, orchids. Beautiful orchids. We spent, well, we had an engine change there. We could have probably gone on with it but we didn't think we wanted to do it. We wanted to stay, they had a nice bar. Nice club.

Mark: So, you got back to the States. You got discharged, or did you go into the Reserves, or what happened?

Edsall: After we got back to the States, they gave us leave. And I came back home, and got married. No, I was already married. I came back home and spent some time with my wife. And then they sent us back down to Clearwater, Florida. Tampa. In a base just outside of Tampa. And we were supposedly there getting ready to go to the Pacific. I was having some problems. I didn't want to go back over. I'd been over twice, and I figured my luck had run out. So, there was, not an order, but a way of doing it, because, if you had been over twice, you really had to volunteer to go the third time. So I was trying to make sure they knew I wasn't volunteering. But that didn't seem to make a heck of a lot of difference. There was a nice company clerk there that really helped me out, a great deal. So I did delay the period, being shipped out of there. By probably a week or two. Then the Japanese capitulation came about. And so I never had to leave. Then we were there for, I guess, probably over a month after the war was through. We were getting, be processed out. They were looking for a C. O. in the airfield in Mississippi. And they were off in a Captain's uniform and I was sort of interested in it. My wife wasn't. She had come down. And we were living in Terrot Beach. But, so I got discharged there.

Mark: And, so, after the war, it was time to get the rest of your life back on track, I guess. You had done a little bit of college, but you hadn't really been established in profession, so, after the war, what were your goals? What did you want to do to get your life back on track, and how did you do it?

Edsall: I guess, I knew I had to go on back and get an education, finish my education.

Because, other than that, I realized I was not going to accomplish what I wanted to do. But I really wasn't certain what field I wanted to go in, and so I had decided that — I had talked with — our next door neighbor was Visser Refrigerator president and he had suggested maybe I ought to go back and take what they called, at that time, business engineering. Which gave you a little engineering - business combination sort of thing. And I put [unintelligible] for that area. Harvard, at that time, was giving that sort of to vets, and they were also giving breaks on accepting people without as good a background and education as you needed. But my uncle, who also worked for Visser Refrigerator said, "You know, I think, before you do that, you ought to go down and go through as an engineering institute. You know, we use them, kind of, to slot people in." Northwestern University was operating it at the time, and that is what I did. I spent three days going through that. Little girl who read my report to me said to me, "You know, you test best in architecture, or city planning." I said, "What is city planning?" She said, "You don't think the sky line of Chicago just happened?" Well, of course, it did. But, she said, "Your vocabulary is limited. And we don't think you should go east to a high vocabulary school, such as Harvard." So I started writing around the mid-West, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. As a matter of fact, Wisconsin didn't have an architectural school or a planning school at that time. Michigan did. But Illinois wrote back and said, "Why don't you come down and visit us? While we don't have a degree in city planning, we do have a degree in architecture and we can work out something." So I went down and the associate dean sat me down and said, "You know, as a war veteran, you can be entered into a branch we call Special Service for War Veterans, and this allows you to jump a lot of introductory courses, and things like this. Because we've got your [unintelligible] or something of this nature." And he said, "We'll set up a course of study that will give you an opportunity to go either into architecture or city planning, or both of them. They are so closely related, literally one degree should give you, but you need the background in city planning if that is the field you want to go in." So, that is what I did. They set up this series of courses. And, at that time, and that is why I ended up at the University of Illinois. At that time, the administration was also pushing people through rather rapidly. So that in two and a half years, I did what was equal to a four or five year program. Because what they did, they made full credit summer schools. The first summer I was there, they had to have one, they had two twelve periods. The second one, they had the regular sixteen period. So you were able to have a cut, and you were able to carry twenty-two credits a semester. Which is a pretty hefty load but it was good to do it. And they gave you other breaks, and things like that. I didn't have to take, for instance, Introduction of Government but I did take City Government because that was part of the city planning curriculum they thought we ought to have the background in. You started school in the morning at seven o'clock. Classes started at seven. And, out of the architectural classes, I could, you

know, you were working in a lab. And because boards were limited, I did a lot of my stuff at home. So I could literally work in the afternoon. And I did. I worked in the construction. They had three guys, three of us, formed a company. We'd build houses.

Mark: I suspect the University had heard of the G. I. Bill.

Edsall: Sure. If it hadn't been for the G. I. Bill, I couldn't have afforded it, or done it. But it was several months before it came through. But \$90 a month at that time was a windfall, believe me.

Mark: So, it covered your expenses pretty well. Books and tuition?

Edsall: Well, tuition was, forget it. They paid the tuition. And you got an allowance for books and instruments, and things like that. Then you got \$90 a month for taking care of your living.

Mark: And so that worked out fairly well for you, then?

Edsall: Oh, yea. It was a marvelous program, as far as I am concerned. And all of my friends who went through it were equally, I think, happy about it.

Mark: I suspect the campus at the time was pretty much filled with veterans.

Edsall: Oh, boy, yes. I think the enrollment at Illinois, the highest enrollment before the war, as 9,000. And when we got there, it was 20,000. That is why everything was so awfully crowded. Housing was almost impossible. In the whole community. It is a smaller area than Madison. And the kinds of classes you could get into were crowded, some of them. If you had to have a class, you really had to kind of work at it, to get it. But you also had, they went for longer periods. For instance, I would have classes at like seven o'clock in the morning. I'd have some at six, and sometimes eight o'clock at night. And in between, you'd have, I had, because I had some space, I even took a course in bible law. Now, that sounds strange, because state universities don't give courses in the bible, but this was taught as a literature course. And he was a fine teacher. The only reason I took it was because I was interested in finding out more about the bible, not because I was religious.

Mark: Now, in terms of housing, there were various housing complexes at the University of Wisconsin that the university created for student veterans, especially married, such as yourself. Were there similar sorts of sub-divisions, you would eventually

call them? In Champagne?

Edsall: Yea, there were. There were barracks but, God, I was on the list, I must have been like a hundred and fifty-seventh on the list, or something. So we had to find, end up, we actually ended up buying a house. It was a \$3,000 [there is a ten second pause on the tape.] And, again, neighbors were marvelous. It was fortunate because I met the two guys I ended up partners with in the construction. So we were able to supplement our income. Why, heck, we paid each other a dollar an hour. Which was pretty good at that time.

Mark: Now, in terms of medical and psychological adjustments after the war, did you have any that you had to make, and medical problems, or something like that?

Edsall: Yea, I had a couple of medical problems, but the one that I wished I had probably done something about earlier, so I could have got veterans help, is these.

Mark: Your ears?

Edsall: Yea, the hearing. You see, flying in prop planes, which our 24s were, there is an awful lot of whine. And an awful lot of noise. And, at least the doctors said that was probably what contributed to the nerve damage I've had in my ears. Which didn't really show up as greatly as — I have probably loss of hearing early. I didn't start to really lose it until in the '70s. And then I started losing it. I started wearing hearing aids about '75 or '76.

Mark: But it was too late by that time to get the VA in?

Edsall: Well, there was no way of proving that this was caused by that. There was no way of proving what causes loss of hearing like that.

Mark: Yea. I've just got one last thing I want to cover, and this may or may not even apply to you, and that involves veterans organizations, and reunions, and that sort of thing. Did you ever join a veterans organization? Like the big ones? The Legion, the VFW?

Edsall: No.

Mark: No reason? No time?

Edsall: No, at the time, I was not — I was trying to forget the service. But there was a group called AMVETS. What the heck was that? Anyway, they were politically, at the time, interested in things that I was interested in. And Douglas, who was our

Senator at that time, had been a veteran and, like Dole, had an arm that was bad. And a good Democrat, out of Chicago. And so I joined that outfit for a while.

Mark: Now, this was in college?

Edsall: Yea. Because we went around, for instance, collecting signatures on a telegram to send to Washington. I can't even remember what the issue was, now. But, we sent it to Douglas, and he was already trying to defeat it. That was kind of stupid for us.

Mark: Did you stay active in the group once you left college?

Edsall: No. No, I guess I'm not a particular joiner. I don't belong to service clubs, or things of that nature. We did, at one time, belong to the Junior Chamber of Commerce because we won an architectural competition for their headquarters in Oklahoma. So we joined that. But, I guess, I, at least, in looking back, I suspect partly this is because we got to the point where you didn't make a lot of close associations during the service. You kind of avoided it because you kept losing these guys, and it kind of hurt a little too much. And the few that we made and kept, were guys who were not in the same squadrons. At least, they were spread. Not many of the people I know that were really in combat kept those close associations. Some of them have. But I didn't. And so we have been somewhat, well, when you ask about volunteering, we do volunteer for a lot of things. We do Christmas sharing things, I did, this winter, helped build Houses for Habitat, things like that. And, again, during the time you are together, you are all good friends. But after you have left that group, I don't think any of those people that I worked with all last six months down south, I will ever see again unless they are in another Habitat program again

Mark: That is about it. Those are all my questions. Is there anything you'd like to add, anything you've forgotten?

Edsall: No, I just think it's a marvelous thing you're doing. I think it is good to get this kind of history that someday somebody will want to put together the story of it. And, hopefully, it'll mean that we don't have another conflict like this.

Mark: Fingers crossed.

Edsall: Yea. I look back, I really can say that it was an exciting, marvelous experience, and because I survived that, it was even more marvelous. I wouldn't ever want to do it again.

Mark: I suppose that is an appropriate place to end.

Edsall: Yea.

Mark: Well, thanks for coming in.

Edsall: You bet.

[End of Interview.]