

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
George Ernst
U. S. Army Air Force
World War II

2004

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Ernst, George, (1923-), Oral History Interview, 2004

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

ABSTRACT

George Ernst, Racine, Wisconsin native, describes his World War II experiences in the European Theater as a second lieutenant pilot with the 3rd Division, 96th Bomber Group, 337th Squadron of the Army Air Corps. Ernst describes enlisting in at Milwaukee in 1942 and states that all enlistment into the Air Corps had been recently frozen. However, Ernst's uncle was a notary public and he was able to notarize Ernst's application at a date prior to the enlistment freeze. Ernst describes his transfer to various bases for specialized flight training until finally receiving his commission as second lieutenant. Ernst then describes picking up a flight crew in Louisiana, flying to Liverpool (England), and eventually being assigned to a base in Ipswich (England). He says he flew a new B-17 to England where his new plane was taken away. He was issued an older plane as he was a new recruit who might be quickly shot down. Ernst relates completing seventeen missions before the war's end; also providing great detail concerning aircraft used as well as their control mechanisms. He provides insight into the various ranges the planes were able to travel, describing the "skip bombing" tactic. He tells about visual bombing (no cloud cover) and an incident where he bombed a city through the clouds, leveling the entire city except for the Red Cross Hospital. Ernst discusses that the German Luftwaffe's targeted attacks on B-24's was due to an incident when a pilot of the 100th Bombardier Group pulled away from the German escort he has just surrendered to and destroyed the German aircraft. This earned the 100th Group the nickname, "The Bloody Hundredth." Ernst describes flying food missions to Amsterdam, and VE Day. He relates that he escorted prisoners of war back to France at the end of the war and how he was to be reassigned to the Pacific, but the war ended and he was honorably discharged. He describes his post-war life as a business owner and marrying a veteran who served in the Pacific Theater.

Biographical Sketch

George Ernst, (b. 1923) served as a World War II second lieutenant pilot with the Army Air Corps. Ernst served in the European Theater becoming a business owner and marrying after the war to a veteran. He is a lifetime member of the VFW, and has, more recently, settled in Edgerton, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcript edited by Brooke E. Perry Hoesli, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2008

Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And today is August 19, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with George Ernst at his home in Edgerton, Wisconsin. And George is a World War II veteran of the United States Army Air Forces. George, thanks an awful lot for agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the very beginning? Where and when were you born?

George: I was born in Racine, Wisconsin, June 27, 1923. I went through elementary and grade school and high school in Racine, and when I graduated from William Horlick High School in Racine, I worked for J. C. Penney selling shoes. And that is when the war broke out.

John: Okay.

George: At the time the war broke out, I then went up to Milwaukee and I enlisted in the Air Corps. Which was the Army Air Corps at the time. Funny story about that, the day I got up there, I picked up the application blanks. And I had to take them home to fill out. And I filled them out, and that was on a Friday. I went back on a Monday, and I had heard that they had frozen all enlistments in the Air Corps at that particular time. So I had an uncle that was in the bank, and he was a notary public. So he notarized it that I had filled it out previously before the application was froze. So I got in the Air Corps.

John: When was this? What year?

George: 1942.

John: Okay.

George: That was when I got in the Air Corps. Well, then they sent me from there, they sent me down to Wichita Falls, Texas, for a training course in the Army, learning how to take commands and learning how to march, et cetera, what have you. And from there they sent me down to San Antonio, Texas, where I was classified to go into pilot training. From San Antonio, Texas, at that particular time the whole Southern Command was full of pilots in training. They didn't have room for us. So they sent the whole bunch of us to Santa Ana, California. At Santa Ana, California, they classified me again in going into pilot training, and they sent me to Santa Maria, California, and I graduated from John Hancock College of Aeronautics. From there, they sent me to Lamour, California, where I went through another phase of training and I got into twin engine. At Santa Maria, it was single engine. When I got to Lamour, California, I went into twin engine

training. From there I went to Pecos, Texas. At the time, I was supposed to go to Denver to go into B-26 training, B-25 training, but they were having a lot of problems with them at the time, killing students because they weren't capable of flying that fast a plane at that time. So they discontinued that and they sent me to Pecos, Texas, where I went through more twin engine training. That is where I graduated and got to be a second lieutenant, and got my commission. That is kind of unusual, too. Here, all this time I was an enlisted man. So they had to take and discharge me for twenty-four hours before I was allowed to be sworn in as a second lieutenant.

John: Okay. Now, you say, twin engine. B-25 or B-26?

George: No, at that time we were flying AT-20s, I believe. I can't remember exactly what they were right now. Well, I had a pretty good score in my flying so consequently, rather than going in as a co-pilot some place, they sent me to Lincoln, Nebraska, and from Lincoln, Nebraska, they sent me down to Rosland, New Mexico, where I went through B-17 training. And I graduated from Rosland, New Mexico, as a first pilot. From Rosland, New Mexico, I came home on leave, thirty day leave. Then I went to Lincoln, Nebraska, and picked up a crew. And I picked up my crew, and we went down to Alexandria, Louisiana. We went through our final phasing before...

John: Now, how many guys in a crew?

George: There were ten of us in the crew.

John: And they were, you were the pilot.

George: I was the pilot. I had a co-pilot, navigator, nose gunner, flight engineer, radio operator, two waist gunners, bombardier, and tail gunner. And we went down to, like I say, Alexandria, Louisiana. We went to our final phasing before overseas. Once we got through that, we went back to Lincoln, Nebraska. And I picked up a brand new B-17 right off the factory. And we flew it overseas. We flew from Lincoln, Nebraska, to Gander, Maine. From Gander, Maine, to Goose Bay, Labrador. From Goose Bay, Labrador, to Iceland. From Iceland to Scotland. Then down to England.

John: That was a long way.

George: It took us a whole week to make that trip. Because we were weathered in a lot of places. When we got to England, they came and took our plane away from us because a new recruit flying combat doesn't get a new plane. He gets a war weary plane in case he gets shot down, you don't lose a new plane.

John: Okay.

George: So, they sent us to I believe it was Liverpool, in England, where I got assigned to a base right north of Ipswich, in England. The base was at a place called Eccolls Road, in England. And we were flying there, and we flew combat out of there. One interesting thing I think happened, when you come overseas for the first time, and you are flying combat for the first time, see, I got over near the end of the war. I was very fortunate. I didn't get over during the real peak of it. So when you go on your first mission, they'd leave your co-pilot stay home and they'd send an experienced combat pilot with you, flying as the co-pilot. Well, we had this old war weary plane. So we are heading over top of Sweden. About half way to Sweden, blew an engine. Had to turn around and come home. The group went on their bombing mission. Couple days later we had another mission, scheduled in the same area. Again, the same thing. We were going over Sweden, blew an engine on the darn thing. Turned around and came home. So every time the guys would come back from a combat mission, I'd be at the officers club drinking a little sarsparilla. Everybody by this time was giving me the hee-haw. Well, finally, after the third attempt, we finally succeeded in our combat mission. And from then on my co-pilot naturally flew with me after that. In total, I got in seventeen missions before the war was over.

John: Okay.

George: I was very fortunate. As you know, there was an awful extremely high casualty rate in bombing. I was very fortunate when we went in, we had fighter escort in, we had fighter escort out. Which made a big difference. We had a lot of experiences.

John: The escorts were P-51s?

George: We had P-51s and P-38s. P-38s, they had an extended range with their wing tanks and what have you. They would, P-51s would take us in part way and then the 38s would pick us up, and follow us in, and follow us out. It was an interesting experience.

John: That late in the war, was there much German aircraft activity?

George: Oh, quite a bit. Oh, yea. I'll give you an example. One day I, we were going on a mission one day, and way ahead of us you could see this B-24 group. And all of a sudden the word came out, "Bandits in the area," which meant Germans in the area. And all of a sudden, they came down out of the sky, right between us and this 24 group, and they headed for the 24 group. And you could see tracer bullets

going all over heck, and all of a sudden, this one German pilot, I assume he had been hit by a tail gunner, he banged into a 24 and blew it all to hell. He bounced off of that and hit into a second one, and blew that one all to heck, and bounced off a third one.

John: Oh, man.

George: Well, my nose gunner got on the intercom, and said, "Oh, my God. Look at that." Well, I was trained to a certain degree where you had to try to relax your crew. I can still remember the exact words I used. We were flying at that time, completely cloud coverage below us, and the sun was reflecting off the clouds. I can on, I said, "Oh, my God, isn't that beautiful? Just like the Fourth of July. Look at all the metal flying all over." Well, it settled the crew down. And away we went from that point on.

John: Okay.

George: There is a reason. I don't know if you've ever been told this in your interviews. There is a reason for these Germans hitting the 24s. They were hitting 24s rather than 17s for two reasons. Right during the starting of the war, we had an agreement with the German government that, if we were on a bombing mission, and we were getting hit awful hard by fighters, well, all we had to do was lower our cowl flaps and our wheels and the German fighters would join on with us and take us down and land us at a German field. And, of course, then you would be interrogated to the end of the war. Well, the Americans were on this mission one day, a B-24 group, and they were getting the heck knocked out of them. You can look it up, in history. And the Americans let all the Germans join on their wings, and then they shot them all down. This was violating the gentleman's agreement. It was called, it was the 100th Group over there, and they ended up with the name, "The Bloody Hundredth." The Germans got on the radio and said that Americans would never survive with the Hundredth Group in the future. The Germans actually wiped out the Hundredth Group three times over there. And three times they came back. And this is why they used to take off after these 24s, because it was a revenge type of a deal. The second reason for it was we in the B-17, the only hydraulic control we had in the plane were our cowl flaps and our brakes. We didn't need anything to land but cowl flaps and brakes out there because you can get on emergency strips in England and you could coast to a stop and take off straight ahead again. 24s were all hydraulic controlled. Everything. And all they'd have to do is hit a hydraulic line and blow the plane up. This is why they would take after 24s instead of 17s.

John: I've never heard that. That's, huh? Were 24s coming out of England?

- George: Oh, yes.
- John: I know a lot came out of Italy.
- George: A lot out of Italy but, no, there was 24 bases in England. Talking about that, I forgot about this point of it. During the first part of the way, to show the blunders that the Americans made. During the first part of the war, my group was, I was in the 3rd Division Headquarters, 96th Bomber Group, 337th Squadron. The American government decided, some big shots in the government decided why go and bomb Germany and go all the way back home. Why not bomb Germany and go over across the Channel and go into Africa. Reload bombs in Africa and come back in. They called this skip-bombing. Well, what they forgot was the range of a B-17. And our group was the one that made the first trip. Ninety percent of our planes landed in the Gulf. They had to have Air Sea Rescue come and pick them over to Africa.
- John: What is the range of a loaded B-17?
- George: Ten and a half hours, cruising. And our group stayed in Africa for almost a week before a ATC came and brought them back in. Well, that discouraged that. Then the Americans decided that maybe they could still skip-bomb and they could take off in England, bomb Germany, and land in Russia. And load up in Russia, come back and bomb coming back in. Well, what they forgot was when they came and landed in Russia, it was right across the German lines. It was our group again, the group I belonged to. So that night the Germans came through with their fighters and shot all the American planes up. So my group had to stay in Russia until they could be rescued out of Russia and brought back to England. So, you see, there was a lot of blunders involved at times.
- John: I heard that a lot of pilots didn't want to go to Russia because there was a chance the Russians wouldn't let you out.
- George: I never heard that. Never heard that. The time I was over there. This just possibly could be true in the beginning of the war. Want to turn that off for a minute? [Telephone rang.] Okay, basically, that's the story.
- John: You did seventeen missions?
- George: I did seventeen missions.
- John: What, where were most of them to?
- George: To be honest with you, I don't even remember the names of the towns any more. I

really don't. There were, we did hit the, Bremen Straights, I think one time, and we hit the Kiel Canal which was the submarine pen locks inside there. And most of the rest were into Germany for the ore and Czechoslovakia, we went all the way to Czechoslovakia. I'll tell you a funny story about that. When you go on a mission, you have your three lead planes, and then everybody else follows on, in formation. Of course, the lead plane is usually the lieutenant colonel leading the group goes in. Now, when you go on a mission, now, back in those days there wasn't such a thing as radar, and the American government wanted to have visual bombing. They didn't want you to bomb through clouds, and what have you. So if you go on a mission, and you go for a target, and you go over and it is cloud coverage, you were supposed to leave it and go to a secondary target. Well, the day we got on this target and it was all cloud coverage so when you get to the secondary target, then it is up to the leader what he wants to do. So we went over it, and we passed over it at the time, no flak, no fighters, no nothing. And I'll be a son of a gun if he doesn't make a three hundred and sixty degree turn and come back on the town. Well, again, all cloud coverage, so everybody dropped their bombs, and we went home. Couple days later, *Stars and Stripes*, which was a magazine for servicemen, came out with a big headline, American precision bombing. Here was a picture of this town that we had hit. We had wiped the town out. Except one building in the center of it. It was a big tall building in the center of it, here is the Red Cross on top. Nobody knew there was a hospital there. American precision bombing.

John: Oh, man.

George: And I was there as the war ended. And, before the war ended, excuse me, we made two food missions to Amsterdam. We flew into Amsterdam and we dumped food into Amsterdam.

John: From the air?

George: From the air. The Germans gave us a ten-mile corridor in and a ten-mile corridor out, and they followed us in. They were on each side of us, was fighters.

John: I've never heard of that.

George: Oh, yea. I've got articles on it someplace along the way. The first drop we made, we went in at low altitude, like about four thousand feet, three thousand feet. First drop we made, they didn't have the stuff packed properly and half the stuff blew up all over the ground, like flour and everything else. Then a couple days later we made a second drop in Amsterdam. One thing impressed me on that was as we came into Amsterdam or we left, I don't recall which it was, there was a fairly good sized hill alongside the town, and the Dutch people had planted tulips, and

the tulips read, "Thank you, Yanks."

John: Wow.

George: It was quite impressive to me.

John: Oh, wow. Yea. That's great.

George: But then, shortly after that, this was during the war this happened. And shortly after that the war was over. Then they took and racked out bomb bays up with plywood and we made two trips to Linz, Austria and we picked up French prisoners and took them back to Paris, and then back to England. And after that, they were loading American Army personnel on our planes, and we were flying them down to Casablanca. And from Casablanca, they were boarding them on ships and sending them direct to the Pacific. Well, from Casablanca, we would go to either Marakesh, which is the capital of French Morocco, or we'd go to Port Lyautey and we'd spend the night there, and we'd pick up French prisoners and we'd take them back to either Marseilles, and we'd take them to Paris.

John: I spent about six months at Port Lyautey.

George: Okay. Yea.

John: French air base.

George: And we'd fly them back to Marseilles or Paris, and back home. Going back a little bit, something interesting. The first trip we made to Linz, Austria, we took off in the dark. There were probably six of us. I don't remember again how many of us. And we went across the Alps right at dawn, and they were very turbulent. So we landed at Linz, Austria, and we picked up all these prisoners that had been interned in German camps for years. And now they were released, and they were eating fat off the hog. So we load a bunch of them on each plane and headed back to Paris with them. We no sooner got airborne and above the Alps and my radio operator came up and he said, "Oh, God, I can't stand it back there." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Sir, go back and look." I went back to look, and here these poor guys were laying there and they were throwing up all over themselves and the plane and everything. Well, their air base in Paris was called A24. So we radioed ahead and told them what happened. So when we landed, they had to get in and get the plane cleaned inside. But when these prisoners, these French prisoners, were getting off the plane, the first thing they did was get down on the ground on their hands and knees and kiss the ground. The second thing they did was get up and put their arms around me, and kiss me. The second trip we made, we took empty ammunition cans with us. And we put the empty ammunition cans

all over the plane. So that took care of that. No, it was quite an experience in life.

John: When the war in Europe was over, then, was there any indication you might be going to the Pacific?

George: When the war in Europe, my base was scheduled to go to Frankfurt, occupation. And I was married, had a child at home. And I am of German descent. My dad was born in Germany, my mother's folks were born in Germany. And this is a mistake I made. I regret doing it now, to this day. All I could think of was getting home. And there was a directive that came out that anybody of German descent that was from the immediate area of occupation could not be sent there. So three of us found out about this, and we went into the, well, during the war, our lieutenant, we had a full colonel, Colonel Nolan, who was head of our base. And we got a very loose base. You could do what you wanted to do, and everything else. We had a general on the base, General Olds. And he was 3rd Division commander, and Colonel Nolan was the base commander, and they used to fight like mad, because one wanted to be tough, and the other didn't want to be tough. Olds, he was a loose goose, believe me. He had women living with him in his quarters all the time over there. And, incidently, he was the first man to ever fly non-stop around the world, too. After the war, he flew a B-29 non-stop around the world. But, what the heck was I going to say about on the base? Oh, and then we found out about this, and we went in to this new commander. They railroaded our commander home and they brought in a new guy, who was a major, to run the base. And he was a West Point graduate. He was tough. As each officer met him, you had to go in in Class A dress and you had to stand at attention, and everything else. So I lumbered into his office with a pair of flying togs on. And he wasn't very impressed. And I said, "Sir, I understand we are going to occupation Frankfurt." And he said, "That's right." "Well, you can't send me there." He says, "Why?" I said, "I have a grandma and grandpa who lives there. And aunts and uncles." Three days later, the three of us were railroaded home. And our orders read, thirty days leave and direct to the Pacific. Well, I came home, and I was three days on a freighter, and the Jap war was over.

John: Okay.

George: And I had my thirty days leave, and then I went down to San Antonio, and I spent six weeks in San Antonio laying around and doing basically nothing. I got discharged, and I came home.

John: Yea. That must have been a tremendous relief for you and for everybody when the Japs surrendered.

George: Oh, very much so.

John: That would have been a blood-bath.

George: Very much so.

John: Afterwards, first of all, did you stay in touch with any of the guys?

George: I stayed in touch with most of my fellows. To my knowledge, today, everyone is dead, except one. I had a waist gunner, his name was LeRoy Van Dyke. He was about six foot four and a half inches, thin as a rail, and didn't have a brain in his head. He was married at the time. His wife's name was Rosemary. They also traveled with us around the country while we were in the States. Well, after the war, I still get Christmas cards each Christmas from LeRoy. After the war I got a Christmas card said, "George, you will be very happy to find out that I just went through barber school, and I am now a barber in Joliet, Illinois." Well, this was fine. The following year, still a barber. The following year, still a barber. Couple of years later, I got a card, "George, I am not only a barber, but I bought a farm now and I am raising hogs." So, more power to you. Here is a fellow didn't have a brain in his head, you know. Couple years later, he is running for the Senate, to represent Joliet down in Springfield, Illinois. He won and he put in eight terms down there.

John: Wow.

George: Last year, he ran for mayor of Joliet, and he didn't make it. I saw him once, after the war. I saw a couple of my other fellows, just once. To my knowledge, they are all dead now except LeRoy.

John: Okay. What about vets organizations? The VFW, the Legion?

George: I belong to the VFW as a lifetime member for many, many years. I have never, well, I should say, I am not active in it any more. I'm not active in it. A life member. It's a good organization, really. I do take advantage of the Veterans Administration up at Madison, the hospital. I've been going there for probably twenty-five years. My wife was also a veteran, and she was going there all the time before she died.

John: What branch was she in?

George: She was in the Pacific. She was in the Signal Corps.

John: Okay.

George: She was in New Guinea. She was right in the front lines. She was in, oh, I can't think of a few of the other names. She ended up two days after MacArthur returned to the Philippines, she ended up in the Philippines. And she lived in Manila. With a Philippine family there. But, you know, she had been around. She had seen...

John: You had the GI Bill. Other than the medical coverage, did you use it?

George: I've never taken advantage of it whatsoever. None whatsoever. I applied for it, which I did get a notification that I could take use it but I never did.

John: And when you got out, what did you do after?

George: Oh, I kicked around. I had a job there, I had a job there. I decided I wanted to go back flying. I went to United Airlines, Chicago. Took my resume with me. And they hired me, but they temporarily hired me. I didn't have a commercial license at the time. I was told to go back to Milwaukee and get my commercial license and come back to them. I was hired and they sent me to Denver, and sent me through their blind flying school to get my instrument rating back. And I went home and told my wife about it, she was so mad about it. Remember, we just got together after the war again. She was so mad about it, I dropped that. And to this day, again, I regret it, because I enjoyed flying. I kicked around this and I kicked around that, and I finally, in 1953, I believe, I was selling television wholesale parts out of Racine. I covered Lake Geneva, Delevan, Janesville, Madison. Beaver Dam, Oshkosh, Omro. And I eventually decided I wanted to go into business so I opened an appliance store in Janesville, Wisconsin, and I had that for eight years, and I didn't like it. And I went to strictly electronics. And I had an electronics store. Between the two of them, I was almost forty years. And when I hit seventy, I decided to retire, and I sold the store out and got rid of it. And, incidently, the fellow that bought it after me lasted two and a half years, and he went belly up. Well, that's what I did with my life. Retired at the age of seventy. And I got sick and tired of sitting around the house doing nothing so I went to work part time, and I work part time yet today. I'm eighty-one years of age right now.

John: Yea, I called a couple of times and someone said you had gone to work. The last question. You were a young man. You had your whole life ahead of you, and then this thing happened, and they grabbed you for several years. I don't know, you spent several years of your life doing something else. Looking back on it, how do you feel about that?

George: I loved it. My dad was in the first world war. I was in the second world war. And my son was in Vietnam. So, I think we put our share in. Right.

John: I was talking to, I write. And a good friend of mine who just passed away, Stephen Ambrose, and he wrote quite a bit about World War II, and the vets who fought World War II. And he was giving a talk one evening, and there were a bunch of guys from World War II. And most of them were saying, "I didn't do much. I really didn't do a lot." And Ambrose, of course, he was a big B S er, he said, "You know, you guys were giants!" And the guys kind of looked at each other. And he said, "You know, you went out and you saved the world." And you did. You did your thing.

George: Personally, myself, I think we should have what they have in Israel. That we should have mandatory, what is the word I want to use?

John: Military service?

George: I think at least for two years for anybody. I think it would do them a lot of good. Certainly, in my opinion, it would straighten out a lot of these kids that are having a lot of problems today, when they do grow up. My grandson, he's listening to all of this, he's fifteen years old. He moved here with his mother from Colorado last summer. He goes to Edgerton High School. He's a straight A student all the way through. He played baseball last year with them. Right now he plays football with them. He wants to go to West Point.

John: Oh, that's great. Well, this is a great story. This is tremendous.

George: It's a story.

John: What I will do, I will take this back and I'll give this to the museum archives. I am going to shut this off.

George: Incidentally, before you shut it off, I have been up there and gone through the war museum up there. It is absolutely terrific. Absolutely terrific. Everybody in the United States should go through that. My daughter works up in Madison, on the square. She is the one that got me to go through it. And she was at a book signing here, about a year ago, from somebody that has something to do with this. I don't even know the name. And his remark to her at the time or to the group he was talking to, that he traveled all over the United States going through different war museums, and this is the finest one he has ever been through.

John: It really is.

George: I've told an awful lot of people about that up there. An awful lot of people.

John: Well, what we'll do is...

[End of Interview.]