

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
NORMAN C. HERRO
Navigator, Air Force, World War II

2000

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Herro, Norman C., (1918-2009). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 65 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Herro, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 316th Troop Carrier Group, 9th Air Force serving in North Africa and Europe. He mentions enlisting in the Army Air Corps in 1941 and training as a navigator at Kelly Field (Texas) and Ellington Field (Texas). He describes duty in Egypt, flying troops and supplies to the English Army in C-47s and returning with wounded and prisoners of war. At Royal Air Force Station El Adem (Tobruk, Libya), he recalls surviving German bombing raids and getting along well with the British, Australian, New Zealander, and South African soldiers. Herro describes life in North Africa including food, occasionally spending the night in the desert during missions, problems caused by sandstorms, navigating over the desert, and the availability of alcohol. After moving into Sicily, he speaks of transporting paratroops to the Anzio and Salerno beachheads. Transferred to England, Herro contrasts training in radar equipment with celestial navigation, and he mentions nearly running out of gas due to faulty readings. He touches on two British innovations: the GEE box and the 717 radar scope. He speaks of lengthy training with "Pathfinder" paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st Airborne and, on D-Day, dropping them in the zone between Cherbourg and Ste. Mere-Eglise (France). He states that most of the paratroopers he trained with died in Normandy and Bastogne (Belgium), and he recalls being on call for sixteen days straight, waiting for a break in weather to drop supplies during the invasion of Bastogne. Herro touches upon dropping supplies to soldiers in France and across the Rhine River, being stationed in Paris for six weeks, and V-E Day celebration in England. He recalls being sent to the States to prepare for the invasion of Japan and being released soon after V-J Day. He talks about using the G.I Bill to attend law school, keeping in touch with two officers from his crew, and revisiting airbases and drop sites.

Biographical Sketch:

Herro (1918-2009) served in the North African and European theaters of World War II as a C-47 navigator. After the war, he settled in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Jeremy Osgood, 2010.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

- Jim: We do both.
- Norm: You got me wired. This is a one man dog and pony show.
- Jim: Yeah, it sure is.
- Norm: Here I thought—
- Jim: State of Wisconsin doesn't spend a lot of time on their volunteer program.
- Norm: I thought you were going to bring a big staff for this important meeting.
- Jim: Staff? I'm not that important, for a staff. They got me on the cheap. All right. Now, in order for us to print material that we acquire, we have to have your approval. So. Anyway, we need your signature in that empty space there. So when we print the book and then make the movie, you'll be sure to get your ten percent.
- Norm: Get the name spelled right, huh? You mind if I put an initial in here?
- Jim: Oh, not a bit.
- Norm: Because there are two Norman Herro's in Madison.
- Jim: Oh, okay. I'll fill out all that after. You just sign in that blank space, that's all I ask. The blank space.
- Norm: Above the—
- Jim: In the blank space there.
- Norm: Above the, all right.
- Jim: Excellent. All right. Okay. Talking to Norm Herro, it's 14 July, year 2000. Where were you born?
- Norm: Milwaukee.
- Jim: When was that?
- Norm: November 3, 1918.
- Jim: November? And when did you enter military service?

Norm: I enlisted in the Army Air Corps in July of 1941.

Jim: July of '41. Where did they send you?

Norm: First stop was Kelly Field, at San Antonio, Texas.

Jim: You had all your basic stuff there?

Norm: Yes.

Jim: And when did they start moving you towards one aircraft, versus another aircraft?

Norm: I think we got into the C-47s in Houston, at Ellington Field.

Jim: That would be, what? How much later? A year later, or less?

Norm: It must have been, about February or March of 1942.

Jim: You'd always been a multi-engine aircraft driver?

Norm: No. I was not a pilot. I was a navigator.

Jim: Navigator. And you went to special navigator school in Houston? Was that course about six months?

Norm: Well, I think we started in, probably in December, November or December, and finished our training and went overseas at the end of October in 1942.

Jim: To England?

Norm: No. First station was on the Suez Canal in Egypt.

Jim: Egypt.

Norm: We were in the 316th troop carrier group.

Jim: Wait a minute. Got to get that. 316?

Norm: Troop carrier group. And we were attached to the British Army.

Jim: So your duties there were what?

- Norm: We were involved in transporting troops, ammunition, supplies, gasoline, to Montgomery's forces on the push from El Alamein, and we often carried back litter patients and prisoners of war.
- Jim: Oh. That's a nice combination. You had to keep them apart? Probably, huh?
- Norm: We kept them apart, yeah.
- Jim: How many litter cases could you bring in a C-47, roughly?
- Norm: I would guess a maximum of eight.
- Jim: Eight. That sounds about right. And, your crew then was a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, and—
- Norm: Crew chief and radio operator.
- Jim: Five of you.
- Norm: Five of us.
- Jim: Right. Did you stick together most of the time?
- Norm: All through the desert campaign. And I was assigned to a different, a number of different planes after we moved to Sicily.
- Jim: Right. Now while you were there, how many American planes were helping the British at this time. I mean, you were a part of how many, for instance?
- Norm: Well, our combat strength for the group was 52 planes.
- Jim: Fifty-two C-47s?
- Norm: Yes.
- Jim: Boy! That's a lot of transport.
- Norm: Well, we had 13 in each of four squadrons that made the 52. And there was another group with us. I believe it was the three? Nope I'm not sure. They were British troop carrier squadrons. They were also, but there were American liberators stationed in the Suez Canal area. And they were used on bombing runs, and for transport when this—
- Jim: Was this a large American base that you were on?

- Norm: Yes, it was probably, the first one we were at was probably the largest base in the Suez Canal area that was associated with American forces.
- Jim: So, what was your housing, in tents? Or housed in barracks?
- Norm: All of the above. We were in tents at times, when we were up in the desert. We were in barracks of one kind or another when we were back on the canal, and we moved back and forth.
- Jim: Generally you flew every day, or several times a day? How would you describe that?
- Norm: Well, one trip a day, probably, three to four days a week.
- Jim: And your trips were generally how, what distance, roughly speaking? Couple hundred miles?
- Norm: Well, it depended on where the front was.
- Jim: I understand.
- Norm: As the Germans pulled back, we'd go farther. Originally our flights were Suez Canal to, oh, say, Mersa Matruh area, which would have been in the range of a hundred and fifty, two hundred miles. After that, as the front moved forward, our flights would become three hundred miles, four hundred miles.
- Jim: Was loading a problem on the airplane? Did you ever have a lot of heavy stuff that made you wonder whether you could get all that up in the air? Or never had a doubt it?
- Norm: No, we never were worried about it. We knew what our load capacity was, and obviously wouldn't exceed it intentionally.
- Jim: Right. Getting shot at? Was that a problem?
- Norm: A couple of times, but rarely. The main, principal danger we had was, early in the war the Germans would come over every night and bomb us, when we were at Tobruk. We were stationed at El Adem airbase, outside of Tobruk, about 18 miles from the harbor. And that's where we ran into our first bombing raids by the Germans.
- Jim: So, you had a slit trench to jump into?

- Norm: Exactly. I recall one story of sitting in our tent and hearing the air raid sirens going off at Al Adem. And I was with a buddy from Texas. And all of a sudden a British Tommy went chasing by our tent going fast as he could run. And I said to him, "Where you going?" He said, "I'm headed for a slit trench." And I said, "Let's go." And my buddy said, "No," he said, "I'm gonna stay here." So I yelled at the British kid, I said, "How long have you been in the desert?" He said, "Two years." The Texan said, "Wait a minute, I'm going with you!"
- Jim: Right, the voice of experience had spoken.
- Norm: They were battle hardened. Good troops.
- Jim: You got along pretty well with them? The Brits?
- Norm: Very well.
- Jim: Yeah. Most people I've talked to have said they just had wonderful relationships with them.
- Norm: We had wonderful relationship with the British, and the New Zealanders, and the South Africans, and the Aussies. All of whom took part in that campaign.
- Jim: Everybody says that the New Zealanders and the Aussies were sort of wild and crazy guys. Was that your experience? They seemed a little looser than—
- Norm: They were looser than the British. The South Africans were pretty straight laced on the whole. And I guess you're right, I guess the New Zealanders and Australians were a little more—
- Jim: Did they all have to have tea at four, no matter what?
- Norm: Yes.
- Jim: Wherever they—
- Norm: Wherever they were, they—
- Jim: The colonials as well as the home town Brits.
- Norm: They all had tea.
- Jim: You ever get used to drinking that?

- Norm: Sure. It was better than the coffee we could get.
- Jim: It was.
- Norm: Yeah.
- Jim: Your base, generally, though, had reasonable food? Supplies? You didn't have to eat out of K-rations?
- Norm: We had K-rations and C-rations a lot.
- Jim: Because the alternative was worse.
- Norm: Well, the alternative was nothing. The only real alternatives we had at times were, if we were near a British camp we could use their mess. But then we'd get bully beef and beans. And, yeah, the C-rations were a better alternative.
- Jim: Right. Yeah, a lot of guys complained that in the Pacific they had to eat the Australian—
- Norm: Bully beef.
- Jim: No, the lamb. Or the mutton. They said it just got so they just didn't even bother opening the can, they threw it all overboard, 'cause they couldn't stand the taste after a while. And, but, well, theoretically the Americans were supposed to supply you with food and things. You mean it's limited?
- Norm: Well, when we were in camp we had good rations. But when we were on missions, often times we would stay overnight in the desert.
- Jim: Oh, you'd fly into a place and then stay overnight?
- Norm: Stay overnight and go back the next day.
- Jim: With prisoners or with wounded. Did you have to carry a medical on with you, when you took the wounded back? Did they send one or no?
- Norm: No. All we were doing was transporting them from one medic to another.
- Jim: They had to promise to stay alive if they wanted to be transported? Right. The planes all worked fine in the desert, or was that sand a problem? For your engines?
- Norm: Sand was always a problem. Especially during the sand storm periods. In usually March and April, the khamsin would come up and fill everything

with sand, including your mouth. Even when your mouth was closed you'd get sand in it. Because the winds were so strong, and the sand chipped, just, take the paint off the planes. And it got into the engines. No way to keep it out.

Jim: There was no way. Draping over it, with tarps wouldn't do it.

Norm: You could cover them with tarps but you still got sand in.

Jim: So how'd we combat this and keep them going?

Norm: Well, the crew chiefs were darn good. They kept the planes clean as they could, and when they got sand in them, they took them apart and put them back together again.

Jim: That's a painstaking job!

Norm: Remarkable effort by those people.

Jim: Wow! That was hard to do, I'm sure. I'm sure the pilot listened to those engines very carefully before he put the foot on the pedal every day, and make sure it sounded okay.

Norm: That's right. The engines were checked out carefully before we took off.

Jim: Right. Could you tell? By the sound of the engine, whether all the sand had not been removed, or there was no way of telling?

Norm: I couldn't tell.

Jim: They didn't speak of that. Well, how about navigating over a desert? That doesn't sound like an easy task, either, when it all looks the same.

Norm: Well, it's not as bad as it sounds, because we were usually fairly close to the coastal highway and the Mediterranean. So we could always find landmarks. Checkmarks along the way to use for gauging our speed and our distance.

Jim: Okay, and when you got back to base did they have to furnish a beer? Have a officers—

Norm: I happened to be the procurement officer for our squadron.

Jim: Well, then, I'm sure we had—

Norm: When we were in the desert we always managed to have beer.

Jim: How about hard liquor? Was that—

Norm: Whiskey.

Jim: That's available, too?

Norm: We used to buy scotch and Canadian whiskey from the British.

Jim: From the Brits.

Norm: Scotch was four dollars a bottle, and the Canadian was two seventy-five. And we could get beer. So, I used to make at least one trip a month from the desert back to Cairo, to load up on supplies.

Jim: How long were you attached to the Brits? Roughly?

Norm: Until the war ended in Africa, in North Africa. Which would have been, I think we moved—

Jim: Would have been January or February of '43.

Norm: I think we moved out of Tunis in January, at the end of January.

Jim: '43.

Norm: In '43. And that's where, that was our last station. We were stationed at el Ahmera air base, outside of Tunis. And then we moved over to Sicily. No we didn't, no we didn't. It was later than that. We didn't move to Sicily till after the invasion of Sicily. Which was in July, I believe, of '43. So, my timing is off on that—

Jim: So, July '43 you moved to Italy. Attached to the—

Norm: Shortly after June.

Jim: Attached to the 15th Air Force there?

Norm: No, we were still 9th Air Force.

Jim: Still 9th. And where in Italy?

Norm: We were in Sicily—

Jim: Oh, Sicily!

- Norm: At a place called Trapani, about fifty miles south west of Palermo, on the west coast of Sicily.
- Jim: Were you there for a bit?
- Norm: We were there through the summer and fall, and we assisted in supporting the Anzio and Salerno beachheads. And we used to fly to Foggia Air Base in Bari, in Italy. And we moved to England in January of 1944, to stage for D-Day.
- Jim: Your duties, roughly the same in Italy as they were in Egypt? Except you just didn't have the British with you? You carried supplies forward and you brought back wounded? About the same deal?
- Norm: About the same. It was more, we carried troops in more often than we did in the desert. In the desert you could move by truck. But in Sicily we dropped troops in, you know, at the beachheads, for support. Because our beachheads were pretty precarious for a while.
- Jim: You mean you dropped paratroopers out? Some Marines got shot at by the Navy.
- Norm: That was in the invasion of Sicily.
- Jim: Yeah, that was a bad deal.
- Norm: I wasn't there. But—
- Jim: Now that I think about it, I think they took down a couple of C-47s along with the—
- Norm: I think our group lost 13 aircraft that night.
- Jim: From that incident? That's a lot.
- Norm: That's a lot out of 52.
- Jim: Right, especially when they're full of soldiers.
- Norm: Soldiers and paratroopers and crews, sure.
- Jim: That was one of the bad experiences, like that one at Slapton Sands in England. The two big problems that the US had in Europe. They lost a lot of men in both of them. Okay. Your duty in Sicily, did that allow you to get in to move with the locals much? When you had any free time?

Norm: Oh sure—

Jim: They seem to be friendly? Charming? Or—

Norm: They were reasonably friendly. There was a convent up on the hill. Well, there was a mountain near our airbase. I used to take a jeep up there, and the people, the nuns in the convent were always cordial. Pleasant. And Trapani was kind of a poorer town. So occasionally we'd try to get into Palermo.

Jim: It was bigger. City.

Norm: Big city. Yeah, on the north coast.

Jim: And they had entertainments that GIs liked.

Norm: Much more entertainment than there was in Trapani.

Jim: Bars and things, that sort of thing. Were prostitutes a problem in Sicily?

Norm: I don't know if they were a problem. They were everywhere. Wherever the troops went.

Jim: But the bars were generally open to everyone in Sicily? The Germans weren't there very long, so I suppose they hadn't built up any pleasant or unpleasant relationship with the Germans in Sicily, particularly. They weren't there very long.

Norm: I don't know what their reaction to the Germans was.

Jim: Did you eat in any restaurants? Civilian restaurants?

Norm: Oh, sure. Whenever we could get to them.

Jim: Sure. Right. You enjoyed that?

Norm: Yeah.

Jim: Good food. Like being at home, really, isn't it. It's the kind of food—

Norm: Italians are good cooks.

Jim: Yes they are. Well, that was reasonable duty, then.

Norm: Yes.

Jim: Did you get shot at when you were flying those missions down in Sicily?

Norm: No.

Jim: Even when you were dropping some paratroopers?

Norm: We were worried about it, but we never, my squadron never actually got fired on that I can recall.

Jim: When you were dropping the paratroopers, generally, this would be a flight of how many aircraft?

Norm: Well, 13 was the size of a squadron. But sometimes you'd just go by a flight, and there the squadron might break up into flights of three.

Jim: So each of those had about ten paratroopers.

Norm: More than that.

Jim: More than that.

Norm: I guess in the range of 16 to 18.

Jim: About the size of a group with 13 planes. Did you have to make any adjustments in the plane to accommodate the paratroopers?

Norm: No, the paratroopers had to put up with whatever happened to us. Obviously, in going into Normandy that was a problem, because we had to do a lot of maneuvering.

Jim: Yeah, sure. At night!

Norm: As a matter of fact originally we had hoped we could go in at fifteen hundred feet, and decided that was going to be too much time for those guys to be in the air. So we actually made our drop runs at between four and five hundred feet. Which meant that the parachutes had to open rather quickly. But that gave them less exposure to ground fire.

Jim: Moving to England, did they send you into, where in England? I guess I didn't ask that.

Norm: Our first station was at Cottesmore, in the Midlands. That's about—

Jim: Near Nottingham?

- Norm: About 25 miles or so from Nottingham.
- Jim: Yeah, I know where that is. I been there. Big air base there.
- Norm: Huge airbase, and it still is. It's a big strategic—
- Jim: I haven't been there, to the airbase. I been to Duxford. It's further north, outside of Cambridge. They have an air museum there. The Americans have an air museum there, in Duxford.
- Norm: Do they?
- Jim: Yeah. It's beautiful scenery.
- Norm: Was that a B-17 base?
- Jim: It's British. During the war. Bomber base. And, they had American, too, but primarily it was a British bomber base. But anyway. They did both.
- So, this base, you were practicing for what? Practicing dropping?
Paratroops, that was your mission, and you knew it right from the start?
Nothing else you were training for?
- Norm: Training, well. When we moved to England we had had no prior experience with radar. So, when they moved us to England, they picked twenty crews out of the troop carrier groups that were stationed in England, and put the twenty crews, including ours, into a separate base at North Witham, which was, oh, maybe seven or eight miles away from Cottesmore. And we trained, it was a provisional group they formed, called the Pathfinder group, and we trained with British equipment and British instructors to teach us how to use their radar equipment.
- Jim: On-board radar?
- Norm: Yep. So we could—
- Jim: Well, that's a first, wasn't it?
- Norm: Yeah, sure was. And, so that we could use that in the Normandy invasion.
- Jim: Was that your job?
- Norm: Yeah.
- Jim: Dealing with that radar?

- Norm: Yeah.
- Jim: Is that hard to learn?
- Norm: No. It wasn't too difficult. As a matter of fact, it was so much better than dead reckoning—
- Jim: Oh, yeah. You welcomed it.
- Norm: Welcomed it. Welcomed it. Because prior to that, we'd been stuck with either dead reckoning or celestial navigation. And standing up in the dome of a C-47 that's bouncing up and down like a whirling dervish—
- Jim: Wouldn't quite do it.
- Norm: Isn't fun. Isn't fun and isn't very accurate. So that—
- Jim: Was celestial navigation difficult even in good, ordinary circumstances.
- Norm: Well, it works, sure, if you could see the sky. But if you had an overcast you couldn't see anything.
- Jim: Then it was worthless.
- Norm: If we're flying at night. But we did fly from Gibraltar to England. To Land's End, in January '44, at night. We left Gibraltar about eleven thirty. And—
- Jim: In a flight, or just singly?
- Norm: No, we were in flight formation. Three. Flights of three. And, unfortunately, they gave us a bad headwind reading. They told us we were going to have a thirty mile an hour tailwind, and it turned out we had a thirty mile an hour headwind.
- Jim: So you got there a little late.
- Norm: We got there a little late, and, some planes were out of gas when they landed on Land's End. They taxied up and, engines died. It was that close. But the big problem was that we had a big overcast, in addition to the headwind, and so, nobody would believe the readings they were getting off of the stars. And I [**End of Tape One, Side One**] told my crew, I said, "No way we can be doing a hundred and ten miles an hour, when we're supposed to have a thirty mile an hour tailwind, which would have given us a hundred and eighty miles an hour. But we were lucky enough to get a couple of shots on stars that would give us speed lines, to prove that we

were doing a hundred and ten. And, so, we just barely limped into Land's End.

Jim: On fumes? Well, that was a real triumph for you.

Norm: It was a triumph and it was a trial. Everybody was sweating.

Jim: Right. Did they give you a medal for that?

Norm: Oh, I don't know.

Jim: They must have.

Norm: We got, no, I didn't get any special medal for that.

Jim: Okay. The Pathfinder group, it was designed originally to drop at fifteen hundred feet. That was your plan.

Norm: That was the plan.

Jim: Right. And that was the plan right up until you got over France and you realized, this is not a good plan, or did you decide that before you left England?

Norm: No. Well, I think we decided before we left England that we'd have to come in lower than that, because of the potential for shrapnel and flack getting those guys before they could hit the ground. And rifle fire.

Jim: Did you know about the dummies that they dropped in there earlier? Were you aware that they'd done that? Little self exploding dummies, they were about this big.

Norm: No, we weren't aware of those.

Jim: So, that alerted the Germans already, you see, before you guys got there.

Norm: Well, I'm not sure. Because we were the first troops, the first carriers in. We were in about, if my recollection is right, around one thirty-five in the morning of D-Day. About five hours before the troops hit the beaches. Because our mission was to drop these specially trained Pathfinder paratroopers, whom we had lived with and trained with in England for five months. To get them on the ground so that they could set up beacons, so that the mass of the aircraft following us, forty-five minutes later, the whole entire groups, could come in and home in on those beacons. So their mission was to get on the ground, set up the beacons, and then

protect themselves as best they could, and take control of intersections, cut off communications.

Jim: How did you practice that, in England? I mean how can you practice something like that, really?

Norm: Well. We flew—

Jim: They're the ones that had to practice, setting up their stuff, huh?

Norm: We flew patterns with them, that simulated an approach to the French coast.

Jim: You dropped them at fifteen hundred then.

Norm: That's my recollection, yeah. We were dropping them high. And some of them didn't like it, because some of them fell in the crick, but [laughs]

Jim: Not your fault.

Norm: The wind does strange things to a parachute. But, no, we actually did fly simulated missions with them. We were living with guys from the 82nd and 101st Airborne.

Jim: Both?

Norm: Both. Guys from both of them were attached to the Pathfinder group. Key guys, and they were excellent soldiers.

Jim: One of them lives in Madison.

Norm: I don't know who that might be.

Jim: Tom Lucas. He was with the 82nd. He made a hundred and thirty nine jumps during his career in Europe and in Korea.

Norm: Wow.

Jim: Not combat jumps, but total jumps. But about thirty combat jumps.

Norm: I made one, that was enough.

Jim: Oh, you made one?

Norm: It was a practice jump we did with the paratroopers, just cause they dared us. They dared us.

- Jim: Oh, I was going to say. That wasn't regulation.
- Norm: No. It was without orders.
- Jim: Right. Did you have to have a couple of shots of bourbon before you got into the parachute?
- Norm: Afterwards.
- Jim: Did you decide as you left out of the plane that this was a mistake?
- Norm: Yeah, that's right.
- Jim: That was your first thought?
- Norm: That was my first. Well, before I left the plane it was a big—
- Jim: How was that experience? Was it more scary than you thought, or less?
- Norm: It was alright. It was about what I'd expected. We were down on the ground rather quickly. It was broad daylight, so we didn't have any worries about falling into—
- Jim: Breaking your leg, that was probably the biggest concern.
- Norm: That's right, that was the biggest concern. Fortunately none of us did.
- Jim: Now, the plan was, that you'd drop these guys about one thirty in the morning, and then return and pick up some more?
- Norm: Then we flew back to, no, we flew back to Northolt Airport at London, for debriefing. And we were interrogated there by staff, who wanted to know exactly what happened to each plane. So we flew into Northolt that night, and spent the night there, as I remember it. And then went back to our bases the next day. And then flew resupply missions during the course of the next two or three weeks, while they were building up the beachheads.
- Jim: When you were taking off now, was it awfully dark that night? Or nothing special? You had moonlight, or do you recall?
- Norm: I don't think we had any moonlight at eleven thirty at night.
- Jim: Now, much has been written about how the paratroopers got distributed over north France, all, none of whom arrived at the spot they'd planned on. Is this due to wind, primarily, or?

- Norm: Well, and evasive action. Trying to protect the paratroopers from ground fire. Wind has a lot to do with it. Error in release time. You know, it doesn't take very long to pass over a drop zone.
- Jim: Make big space differences.
- Norm: Like two seconds you're over the drop zone. So if those guys don't get out instantaneously when the green light goes on.
- Jim: They're several hundred yards away.
- Norm: Well, and, if you think about it, there's a string of eighteen guys. One goes out, next one goes out, the next one. By the time you're there, the last one is out, you're almost out into the ocean.
- Jim: He's a minute behind, right. You dropped them going towards France, or did you go deeper, and turn back towards England and drop them? Or do you recall?
- Norm: No. What we did was, we cut across the Cherbourg Peninsula—
- Jim: East to west?
- Norm: And dropped them just northwest of Sainte-Mère-Église. Which is where the big museum is.
- Jim: Yes, and I've seen that. It's a cute museum.
- Norm: And then we flew out the other end. You see. It gave us an easy exit. We didn't have to turn around and fly back over enemy fire. We just put the nose down and went barreling out as fast as we could go—
- Jim: Out into the Atlantic Ocean, and then swing around.
- Norm: Out into the ocean, and then swing around the Cherbourg Peninsula and head back to London.
- Jim: How long did that trip take you? Roughly?
- Norm: Let's see. We took off, I think around eleven-ten. Dropped around one-thirty-five. I would guess the total would be five and a half hours before we got back to Northolt.
- Jim: And your group, the whole squadron was how many planes? Of this Pathfinder squadron?

- Norm: Well, the Pathfinder group was only twenty—
- Jim: Twenty planes?
- Norm: We only had twenty crews. Our flight was three. Three planes. And each flight would normally be three planes. So they had—
- Jim: So you only had two other planes to look out for.
- Norm: That's right, we had one on each wing.
- Jim: And everybody was instructed, someone in the lead plane said "Now," and then everybody, all three planes emptied?
- Norm: Yeah. And when you hit the green light, the other ones would do the same. But most of our training in Europe, and in the States, was flight formation. You know, you'd have a flight leader, like our flight, our plane. And there'd be one on each wing. And they had to maintain certain distances. Control their speed.
- Jim: Different heights?
- Norm: No, normally—
- Jim: I suppose that pretty much they didn't.
- Norm: They might be just a little bit higher, in order to avoid the slipstream from the engines.
- Jim: That's what I was worried about. A lot of these guys got caught up in the tails if there, they caught the wind just blowing. And there was one fella who I interviewed this fall, who said that not his plane, but another plane, the paratrooper got caught up in the tail. Somebody took the plane, got underneath it and they rescued this guy. This is not D-Day, this is probably training. They rescued this guy who was dangling from his parachute from the tail in the back of this aircraft. They came up underneath him and unhooked him.
- Norm: Wow!
- Jim: That was quite an experience.
- Norm: That's quite a feat.

- Jim: I'm sure it was. So. It was dark. And the wind was fairly active and all those things. Did you find what you were looking for? The spot that you wanted? Were you satisfied?
- Norm: Yes. We think so. We think that our troops, at least, were released at the area of the drop site.
- Jim: The right time and the right place? That's good. And, returning to, when you got back to England, your duty was then changed, you know, supply mission. And you went over in groups with supplies?
- Norm: Ordinarily we might fly in with the squadron, the whole squadron. Thirteen planes. And might even be in a group formation, fifty two.
- Jim: That's a big group. Did your planes last?
- Norm: C-47 lasts forever.
- Jim: I was going to say, after that experience in the desert, you probably had a different airplane.
- Norm: No, we took our planes with us. What we used to do, when we were in the desert, after, I think we had a four hundred and fifty hour limit on flying time. On an engine. We used to take engines down to Gura, which was in Eritrea, near Asmara. Douglas had a repair facility there. And we used to take engines down, and then we'd bring clean engines back.
- Jim: Trade them in.
- Norm: Yeah, they were Pratt & Whitneys. And, the Douglas guys were American guys down there. And always treated us well. Cigarettes and beer. Liquor. And so we'd pick up engines and take them back—
- Jim: But the engines were savable.
- Norm: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, if they hadn't been shot out.
- Jim: Yeah, that's what I mean, but I mean, this is the sand, that didn't ruin the engine forever?
- Norm: No. Not to my knowledge. And in December of '42 I was fortunate enough to make two trips to Malta from—
- Jim: Sicily.
- Norm: Picked up engines. No. In '42 in December we weren't in Sicily.

- Jim: Oh, oh, that's right.
- Norm: From our Egyptian base. We picked up Engines at Cairo and flew them over to Malta for the British Air Force, and the RCAF. With them fighting off—
- Jim: That was a hot spot.
- Norm: Heavy air raids. They had had fifteen hundred air raids that year.
- Jim: It's incredible how much that little dainty island was bombed. And the Germans could never take it. Of course they never really made a concerted effort.
- Norm: It was fortunate that it's a solid rock. And the German's would come over and bomb the airstrip. And then the crews would have trucks hiding in the trees, loaded with gravel and sand. And they'd run out in the field and dump the stuff, and get the hell out of there. And then the bulldozers would come over and steamroll it or whatever. And then the British, the fighters would take off and go after the Germans. It was an incredible effort—
- Jim: Yeah, that whole story of Malta, it's a war almost by itself. It's incredible. Those people are really hardy people. They endured more than, I think, any other civilian group I know.
- Norm: Except the paratroopers. Paratroopers, the 82nd and 101st Airborne were just decimated in Normandy and then in Bastogne, Belgium. Most of my friends died in one of those campaigns. I mean, most of the guys that we trained with.
- Jim: Were eventually killed.
- Norm: Yeah.
- Jim: I've interviewed several guys in the 101st, it's quite a story. Living in Bastogne. And you know, if you ever remember that famous picture of Eisenhower speaking to the paratroopers before D-Day. See him standing there, talking to the guys? If you ever see that picture, you look, just to the left of his shoulder. There's a little paratrooper standing there. That's Harold Sonis (??) from Stoughton. [laughs] Stoughton, Wisconsin. He ended up being a policeman in Stoughton. Charming guy. That's him. He's the one that's standing there. Yeah. It's quite a story, being in Bastogne, near the end. How those guys –

- Norm: Committed.
- Jim: Running out of food, and running out of ammunition.
- Norm: We were in England, stationed, I think we were at Oxford, all during that Bastogne situation, and we were on alert all the time. We couldn't even leave the base, because we had to pray for the first break in the weather so we could fly in and drop supplies, and food, and troops to those guys. And we sweated, I think, sixteen days and nights.
- Jim: The weather closed down that long.
- Norm: Oh, the weather was just unbelievable. It was like, almost Christmas Eve before we were able to get in there.
- Jim: Yeah. That was the worst winter that Europe had in a hundred years. But you eventually got to drop supplies in Bastogne. I suppose there's just kind of one continuous wave after while, until—
- Norm: Yeah. The British were doing the same. We were using everything we had to get food and supplies and ammunition to those guys.
- Jim: Did they have any particular special request? Food or medicine or anything?
- Norm: Everything. They were out of everything. They were out of medical supplies—
- Jim: Did you land anywhere near to bring any wounded back, from that area?
- Norm: Not during—
- Jim: They probably trucked them all back from there.
- Norm: Not during that siege.
- Jim: No, be afterwards.
- Norm: I don't remember. I think they all came back either by truck or by boat.
- Jim: Sure, well, it's fairly close to the coast there. Belgium. Antwerp. You finished the war in England?
- Norm: Yes. After Bastogne, we had, well, before and after and after Bastogne we had spent some time in two different bases in France. One was at Dreux, D-R-E-U-X. The other was at Chartres. And we were stationed fifty miles

away from Paris at Chartres. And we were flying petrol in fifty-five gallon drums. And food, ammunition. Whatever they needed.

Jim: Shipping that gasoline, that'll make you nervous, I bet.

Norm: We did it all through the desert campaign. That was one of our biggest payloads. Was gasoline. You know, somebody sends an incendiary bullet through that plane—

Jim: That's right. That's all she wrote.

Norm: You're gone. So, then, after that we flew the Rhine. We made the drop across on March 24th, I believe. Dropped across the Rhine. We dropped, mixed bag. There were Polish paratroopers. There were British, American, French. Every kind, cause they'd already crossed the river at the Remagen Bridge, you remember. So on March 24th the sky was full of Liberators and big British Lancasters, and our planes. We had, I think we had C-54s at that time. And we didn't, we were still in the 47s. But we made the big drop across the Rhine.

And then they sent us back to England, and then we were stationed in England. And on V-E Day, which was the one day I wanted to spend in London or Paris, they put us on a boat in Southampton and sent us home.

Jim: Oh! You missed the big celebration, there.

Norm: But it was a moving experience. The train went from, I think we got on at Newark-on-Trent, and went to Southampton, and all along, it was a daytime trip, so all along the train route, the British people were out with signs. "Thanks, Yanks," and waving. Throwing kisses. It was a moving day.

Jim: I'll bet it was, I'll bet it was. You have much leave time in Paris? You get some time off in Paris?

Norm: I was, yeah, I was lucky, I was in Paris a number of times. As a matter of fact, I was stationed there for six weeks during the winter of '44. I was attached to 9th Air Force headquarters. General Vandenberg had an office right next to the Ritz Hotel on the Place Vendome. And we lived in a small hotel nearby. It was a nice duty.

Jim: Yeah, I was going to say, that's cushy duty, there.

Norm: You bet.

Jim: That one square where the Ritz is and the Place Vendome—

Norm: It's a beautiful place.

Jim: Beautiful place, yeah.

Norm: I've got a wonderful painting of it, by an American artist. Done by one of our really great impressionists. It's a picture of the street leading to it—

Jim: That's the classic view.

Norm: And then the monument with Napoleon on top, made out of bronze.

Jim: Yeah, that photograph, I think, is probably one of the most photographed spots in Paris.

Norm: Probably is.

Jim: Eat at the Ritz?

Norm: Ate at the Ritz. Drank at the Ritz. We were fortunate to have—

Jim: That's a great hotel. Too expensive for most people's taste nowadays, but—

Norm: During the war it was—

Jim: During the war, right. Didn't meet Ernest Hemingway there?

Norm: No, I didn't meet him.

Jim: Well, that's one place to have great learning.

Norm: Then they sent us back. Took us back to the States. And we were stationed at Fayetteville, North Carolina, at Fort Bragg again.

Jim: When was this?

Norm: Right after the war in Europe ended.

Jim: So you were preparing for Japan.

Norm: We were preparing for Japan. In, it was kind of the end of May and June of '45. And we were there when the war ended in Japan. In the Pacific.

Jim: You got out pretty fast after that?

Norm: Oh, yeah. I think we were released, I think V-J Day was the fifteenth of August. And I think I was on my way by the first of September.

Jim: So did your group, your pathfinder group, must have got several awards.

Norm: Yeah.

Jim: Medals and distinguished service crosses and so forth.

Norm: We all, everyone has air medals, I'm sure.

Jim: And theater ribbons, of course.

Norm: And theater ribbons—

Jim: But that group, though, must have gotten a special award.

Norm: No, I don't think so.

Jim: It didn't? I'm surprised.

Norm: No. Maybe the CO did, but, Colonel Crouch, but none of the troops that I know of got—

Jim: Were you pleased with the guys who were running your pathfinder group? They seemed to know what they were doing?

Norm: Yeah, on the whole they—

Jim: Generally speaking they were pretty good fellows.

Norm: They were really good, yeah.

Jim: Most have them had been in the service a lot longer than you were?

Norm: No, most of the people that we knew that were civilians, some of them were pilots, you know? Had been Air Force, I mean—

Jim: Air line pilots.

Norm: Air line pilots. They went in, they became teachers, taught pilots. Then they, some of them got commands of different squadrons and groups.

Jim: You end up being a Captain by the end of the war?

Norm: I finally made it.

Jim: Captain?

Norm: I was First Lieutenant for the longest of anybody in the military, I think.

Jim: But you got a promotion near the end?

Norm: Well, no, I was a Captain when we went into Normandy.

Jim: Oh, well then.

Norm: Before that.

Jim: So you never made Major, though.

Norm: Never made Major. No.

Jim: Did you have to sign on for more duty?

Norm: Well, yeah, I guess. I wasn't interested.

Jim: You ever fly with those C-54s? Ever fly in those?

Norm: No. We never got out of C-47s.

Jim: Kenny Johnson, you know Ken? Flew that C-54 across the whole, that was his airplane, mostly. It was a much bigger aircraft. Not much bigger, but a little bit fatter.

Norm: C-54 is bigger, a lot bigger. Probably about six times as big as the C-47.

Jim: After the war did you use your GI bill?

Norm: Yes.

Jim: To go to school, or?

Norm: I came, after I tried a year of working as an engineer, with an engineering company, I decided to go back to law school. Go to law school.

Jim: Sure.

Norm: Because I had finished my college before the war. So I went to the university. Got through the law school.

Jim: Great.

Norm: Married—

Jim: The GI bill is terrific.

Norm: Married a Madison girl, before I went to law school. The GI bill was great for all of us.

Jim: It created a middle class America, didn't it?

Norm: Yeah, it really did, yeah.

Jim: And did you join any veterans' groups after you got out?

Norm: I'm not a joiner. I was in the reserve, the Air Force Reserve for a while. And I didn't like it, I thought it was a waste of time. The meetings were relatively meaningless. So I quit after about a year. I was busy. Going to law school. Trying to raise a family. I didn't join any veterans' groups, except I stay in touch with the guys in my outfits.

Jim: That was my next question.

Norm: We had a, recently, a reunion in New Orleans. For the Pathfinder Group. There are only about twenty of us—

Jim: How many are left?

Norm: Twenty one, I think. At least that was what showed up for the reunion.

Jim: Right. And from your plane?

Norm: From my plane, the only one I'm in touch with is the guy who was the copilot in my crew from Sicily on through the end of the war. In Normandy, went into Normandy with him. And he lives in Cincinnati, and I talk to him frequently. We see each other occasionally. He brought his new wife up here last fall.

Jim: Oh, nice. Terrific.

Norm: The other guy, who was the pilot in our flight, in our plane, died a year ago February. We were very close, the three of us.

Jim: I'm sure.

Norm: We'd vacation together in Mexico.

- Jim: Well, you were the three officers aboard that plane, so naturally, you'd stick together.
- Norm: We lived together in a Quonset hut in England for six months, seven months.
- Jim: Sure. well, that's awfully nice that you'd keep contact with such close friends like that.
- Norm: We were lucky.
- Jim: I would say. A lot of. The training you got for the pathfinders. Was that primarily British? Did they seem to have more?
- Norm: It was British equipment.
- Jim: British equipment.
- Norm: They had invented two things that we used in the Normandy invasion. One was called, nickname was the GEE Box. I don't know what the official name was. It was a box that, they had stations on the mainland of Great Britain, that you could triangulate with and create lines that crossed. When you got to this intersection of two lines, you were over your drop zone. Very, very accurate, very highly, very advanced technology for those days. And then we had another thing called the seven-one-seven, which was a scope, a radar scope which they had given us. And that was remarkable—
- Jim: Yeah, the British really developed radar. It was invented by an American in the 30s.
- Norm: Is that—
- Jim: Then it was sort of, you know.
- Norm: Is that, I didn't know that.
- Jim: It sort of disappeared, I mean, not much was done with it, but the British picked it up, and they really turned radar, well, it saved England in the blitz. So, you had a chance to get back to England? Back to Italy? See those places? And your airbase?
- Norm: I've been to all of them.
- Jim: You've seen all your airbases? Are they still there?

- Norm: Uh, England has the North Witham base where the pathfinder group was stationed, has been converted into a truck driving school. Because it's close to a lot of other big air bases. Cottesmore is a major strategic base, bomber base, still, in England. When I went back for the 45th anniversary of D-Day with my two sons in '89, we walked the drop sites. Where we had presumably dropped our troopers. And visited the villages and the towns around. Visited Omaha and Utah, Gold and Sword.
- Jim: That's a great area. I've done it twice.
- Norm: It's a wonderful experience.
- Jim: It sure is. Okay, again, have you any stories that you can tell me that you forgot?
- Norm: I don't think of anything [**End of Tape One, Side Two**] at the moment.
- Jim: Nobody was wounded, embarking on the ship, the airplane? You haven't heard anything?
- Norm: No, we were fortunate. I remember one flight, when we were taking off for relief of Bastogne, our copilot Throckmorton was, he's the guy in Cincinnati. He was flying another plane, and somebody had parked a C-47 too close to the runway. And we were taking off in the fog. It was real, still bad, but we had to get out. We had to get there. And the story goes that he was going down the runway and he hit something, and clipped off the end of his wing. And his copilot looked out, and then he said "Throckmorton, I don't believe we've got all of our wing." They took off, flew around, came back down and landed, took another airplane and got back on the mission. The C-47s' a remarkable aircraft.
- Jim: Look at how long, it's still flying for heavens sakes, I know it's as cargo. Okay.
- Norm: All right.
- Jim: Thank you.
- Norm: You're welcome.
- Jim: I really appreciate it. That was very nice. You did a good job.
- Norm: Glad to do it, I admire what you're doing. I think it's—
- Jim: Oh, I'm having fun.

Norm: Great. Oh, I'm sure you are.

Jim: Yeah, I just passed a hundred interviews.

Norm: Did you.

Jim: Yep.

Norm: Good for you.

Jim: You're my hundred and fourth.

[End of Interview]