

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN B. HODGSON
Gunner, Air Force, World War II.

2000

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Hodgson, John B., (1925-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

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.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 40 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

John B. Hodgson, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a tail gunner with the Company C, 825th Engineering Aviation Battalion of the Army Air Corps in Europe. Hodgson touches on his enlistment, basic training at Miami Beach, cadet training school at Butler University (Indiana), flight training at San Antonio (Texas), armament gunnery training at Lowery Field (Colorado), gunnery school at Naples (Florida), and joining a B-26 crew at Barksdale Field (Louisiana). He discusses being shipped to England separately from his crew and flying missions out of France. Hodgson comments on his responsibilities with the unit such as machine gun maintenance and bomb securing. He discusses bombing mission targets, dropping "chaff" to disrupt German radar, and flak fire. He addresses seeing German aircraft and receiving fighter support. Hodgson touches on keeping in contact with the crew's pilot after the war and joining the American Legion. He mentions V-E Day, training to go to Japan, arriving back in the States on Christmas Day, and getting home to Madison in time for New Years Eve. Hodgson recalls a bombing mission to Wittenberg (Germany) and reflects on the overall quality of B-26 aircraft. He describes a typical mission and addresses food quality, having a three-day leave in Paris, and the effectiveness of his training.

Biographical Sketch:

Hodgson (b. August 7, 1925) served in the Army Air Corps from 1943 to 1945. He was honorably discharged as a staff sergeant and settled in Madison (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed by Noreen Warren, 2010

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Interview Transcript:

- Jim: So, at the beginning here—you were born, when?
- John: August 7, 1925.
- Jim: Where?
- John: Madison, Wisconsin, Madison General.
- Jim: Oh really, okay. And—and when you went in service, when was that?
- John: That was—I enlisted February 22, 1943 and I got called in—I finished high school in June, and I got called in September 3rd, 1943.
- Jim: And what division did you join?
- John: Air Force.
- Jim: Was that a voluntary—?
- John: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: You weren't drafted and moved into the Air Force.
- John: No.
- Jim: And where did they send you?
- John: Well, I went actually into the Cadet Program and I then went to Miami Beach for training first and then I went to Butler University in Indianapolis for Cadet Training School—College. And then I went to San Antonio, Texas and there—when I got there they decided they didn't need as many pilots and that's why I ended up going into armament gunnery.
- Jim: Did you have a special school for that?
- John: Yeah, yeah, special school, that was at Lowery Field at Denver, Colorado. And then from there they sent you down to—where was it? Ah—Florida, if I can think of the name of the town—down by Naples down in there for gunnery school. And then after that we were sent to Barksdale Field, Louisiana to join our crew [Barksdale Air Force Base located near Bossier, Louisiana].
- Jim: Oh, now, you finally got an airplane, huh?

- John: Yeah, finally got an airplane.
- Jim: And what was that?
- John: B-26 Marauders, they called them. Two engines and there was—the crew was from—the pilot was from Texas, the co-pilot was from Texas, the bombardier was from Dyersburg, Tennessee, and the engineer was from Texas, and the radio operator was from California. And I was the lonely Badger, in the tail-gunner position.
- Jim: Oh my.
- John: I weighed 140 pounds, soaking wet. So, then we went—then we trained in Barksdale as a crew, and then we were shipped to Savannah, Georgia to get overseas equipment. And I was sent up to Fort Tauk, New York and the other part of the crew went down to the Azores and flew a plane over to England.
- Jim: Why did they separate you?
- John: Well I suppose they had to carry more gas, and then they didn't—didn't really need me—
- Jim: Until they got further along.
- John: Yeah, so I ended up—I think it was a sea trip before I was flying over to into Scotland and then down to England.
- Jim: Then you met your crew again?
- John: Yeah, they were in Stone, England.
- Jim: Right, well, back up a little. Tell me about your specific situation in the airplane. How did that work?
- John: Well I was in charge of the armament on the airplane. There were ground people that loaded the bombs and all that. But I had the 50 caliber guns and stuff like that to oversee and then the—
- Jim: Your position carried—had two 50 calibers?
- John: Right.
- Jim: Ought-50s?
- John: In the tail.

Jim: In the tail, right.

John: And there was—radio operator had one, and there was turret up above, and the bombardier was up in front and he had one 50.

Jim: The turret? Did the fellow in the turret above would have had twin 50s?

John: Yes, yeah.

Jim: But it was your responsibility to see that they had ammunition?

John: Yeah, I—well, I was kinda in charge of all the guns on the plane and made sure they were all functioning.

Jim: Was that a problem?

John: Well, they misfired a few times and missed, you know—but, you know, it wasn't a big problem.

Jim: Solved those problems?

John: Yeah, and then the bombs of course they were—when you were up in the air, you had to make sure they went off, or they didn't leave the airplane, and they weren't rolling around the bomb bay or something.

Jim: Right. And did they—were they armed automatically, the bombs, when they fell?

John: When they fell they had a—

Jim: Spinner monitor.

John: —spinner on it and it would arm the bomb as it went down. One time we dropped frag bombs and they were in a cluster on a band on a bomb. And I don't think they did that too often because the day we dropped them they, in the slipstream, they all blew back and hit all the planes below, you know, and they were bouncing off of the airplanes and—

Jim: But they hadn't exploded?

John: They hadn't exploded, thank goodness, so nobody got blown up. But we, you know, broke windows and broke pieces in the airplane.

Jim: That's a close thing.

- John: Yeah, they didn't do that again. That was just over the Elbe River.
- Jim: They didn't do that, I mean, drop those—
- John: That type of bomb.
- Jim: —that bomb in formation?
- John: That's right, and in formation, yeah.
- Jim: Yeah, got it, okay. And otherwise, in handling the bombs, there was no problem? They were hauled up automatically?
- John: Oh yeah. That was all done by the ground crew.
- Jim: Generally, you dropped what—250s or 500s?
- John: Well we dropped—we could drop a couple 500s or most of them were, like, mostly 250s and sometimes a 100.
- Jim: So you could carry two 500s or four 250s and—like that?
- John: Yeah, something like that, yeah.
- Jim: Yeah.
- John: Hard to remember back that far.
- Jim: I'm sure, of course, yeah. So once you got your crew organized in England, then did you do a lot of practice?
- John: Well mostly when I was over late so I didn't get over there 'til March—oh, excuse me, I think it was January—of '45. So, we joined actually in France, Beaulieu [Beauvais?], France. And there we began flying missions.
- Jim: Right. So tell me about a typical mission—what would be a target, so far?
- John: Well, mostly with the targets we went after were bridges and marshalling areas—rail yards—and support of the troops. We flew, you know, four or five hours, which was probably maximum for us, up in the air. And then we'd be back, and sometimes we'd fly two a day. But we'd start out early in the morning—
- Jim: And generally in a group?

- John: Always in a group, yeah.
- Jim: Of what, six, eight, or more?
- John: Of much more than that, a squadron. They had squadrons, and they make up a group, so it's probably thirty or forty planes in the whole—
- Jim: Squadron?
- John: Squadron, or group, actually.
- Jim: And you'd generally have the same mission?
- John: The same target?
- Jim: Yes?
- John: Basically, yeah.
- Jim: Was that—this type of airplane would drop bombs at a low level compared to the other—
- John: Yeah, we were from nine to twelve thousand feet most of the time. Sometimes we flew with no mission. We'd called—we would throw up the—
- Jim: Chaff? [Chaff is a defensive mechanism using aluminum foil or aluminum-coated glass fibers which forms a cloud. This creates a smokescreen which hides the aircraft from the view of enemy radar.]
- John: —chaff and that to foul up the radars.
- Jim: Was the anti-aircraft fire very intense?
- John: Yeah, most of the time. I didn't see many fighters, but it was mostly anti-aircraft.
- Jim: Most of the fighters used to—would fly as fast as they could, really.
- John: Yeah, and it was towards the end of the war and there weren't as many either. We had more protection. We had P-51s and P-38s and P-46s.
- Jim: Did they fly with your group? Above?
- John: Mostly 51s. The best cover was P-38s below and P-47s above. For they could dive, and then the other ones could climb.

Jim: Oh.

John: That was the best. But the P-51s were the most of the thing.

Jim: They—generally did you—what was—you fly at? Do you know what speed you flew at?

John: Well, I'm guessing it's around 300 miles an hour, I think, 280 to 315. Somewhere in there.

Jim: Generally the plane flew well? You had not much problem with that?

John: No, we got shot up a few times, but—and had some planes shot down, but we were lucky. We didn't—

Jim: Took some flack, but didn't—it wasn't enough to interfere much.

John: No, no, we were able to come back all right. Most of the times, you had holes in the planes.

Jim: Oh really?

John: Small holes, sometimes holes this big. But I—there was a couple of kids from Madison. I—a fellow by the name of Lawrence that was in the squadron, he got shot down. I remember seeing him go down, but he was captured, a prisoner. Say, I think his name was Bill Lawrence.

Jim: Oh, that name isn't familiar.

John: I think he went to West High School too.

Jim: Oh.

John: Probably even got out in maybe '42, [something] like that.

Jim: Well, I'll speak to my guys I eat lunch with on Tuesday. Two of them are from the class of '42. It's months ahead of you. I'll ask them. Bill Lawrence, huh?

John: Well, I know his last name was Lawrence. I'm not too sure of the first name.

Jim: Yeah.

- John: A big kid with dark curly hair, I remember. Another fellow I ran into was Dwayne LeGrett from Madison. And another fellow was named Harry Spangler. In fact he was in our group. He was a bombardier. He lived on Brooks Street. He went to Central.
- Jim: Your plane—your plane carried five men?
- John: Six.
- Jim: Six. Top gunner and—
- John: Radio operator, tail gunner, bombardier and two pilots.
- Jim: —and co-pilot. Did you get along good?
- John: Oh fine, yeah. We had a good crew.
- Jim: Had you followed, then, afterwards?
- John: Well, I—the pilot came up here one time and he visited. He and his wife was connected with the university, I believe, with some meeting or something, and he's in Houston Texas. And I got a Christmas card this year from him.
- Jim: Oh, that's nice.
- John: But that's about the only one that I hear from now.
- Jim: And the rest of them are still alive?
- John: As far as I know. I haven't contacted.
- Jim: Did you join any veterans' organizations after you got out?
- John: American Legions, mostly. I haven't been too active but—
- Jim: The organization isn't very active, you know. No VFW?
- John: No.
- Jim: Did your group win any unit citation?
- John: Well, I—yeah, some of this—I don't know if you want to look at any of this. [Sound of paper being shuffled.]
- Jim: Sure.

John: Well now. Where is it?

Jim: There's a totals statement from your plane.

John: Yeah, it says no food and POW down. My son's got most of this stuff. But here's some stuff from the general. Here's Madison on V-E Day, so—

Jim: Oh yes an old Madison—A letter of commendation here, that's nice. How many missions did you have?

John: Right on 23.

Jim: 23. Generally, if the war'd gone on, how many before they would have sent you home?

John: Well, if they would have, 65 was the top.

Jim: 65.

John: Yeah and when we—when the war was over, then we started training low level for to go to Japan, but then that never materialized, thank God.

Jim: I was going to say, when the war was finished in Europe, there was still a lot of war left. Did you stay in Europe, or did they move you?

John: No we stayed in Europe and trained for a while, and then eventually I was—getting after the war—was over in Japan, and then they started sending us home. And I got in with an engineering outfit to come back.

Jim: Uh-huh.

John: As a group, they just put everybody together that had the points system and all that. Guy by the name of Morey Lacey—

Jim: Oh, I know Morey.

John: —came by. He's passed away since then.

Jim: Yeah, he had quite an experience over there.

John: I don't—I don't know what he did, but I know he was an engineer.

Jim: He was in the Pathfinders. [Pathfinders was the US Army Paratroopers Corps. They were dropped into place behind enemy lines to operate drop zones, pick-up zones, and helicopter landing sites.]

John: Oh yeah?

Jim: They went over and laid the groundwork before the people jumped. Take down telephone wires and things like that.

John: Oh boy. Yeah, that was tough.

Jim: He had some harrowing experiences.

John: Yeah, he came back in the same boat we came back on, the “Sea Tiger,” *USS Sea Tiger*, Liberty Ship.

Jim: Yeah, so when did you get back to the United States?

John: Christmas Day, 1945.

Jim: '45?

John: Yep.

Jim: And then you were discharged shortly there afterwards.

John: Sure, Fort Sheridan, yep.

Jim: Yeah.

John: Yeah, so—

Jim: Your base in England, was that a big base?

John: That was mostly a replacement depot where I was.

Jim: Oh, I see. For your base generally, when you flew, was in France.

John: Right. Boussey [?], France.

Jim: Was that a big base?

John: Well, it was spread out so much that the, you know, the one squadron be one place up in the woods and the other squadron would be—so you never—it would be spread all over.

Jim: Oh, ah-ha.

- John: And we were separate. And the other squadron—I think there was four squadrons in a group, and they'd be all over.
- Jim: You had the same mess hall?
- John: Just for the squadron.
- Jim: Right. Oh, I see. Each squadron had their own mess hall?
- John: They had their own, yeah.
- Jim: Tell me about the medical facilities there.
- John: Well, I didn't—they were good but I, thank goodness, never had to use them, but they—
- Jim: Sure, I understand. But big hospital? Or a regular, smaller rest home?
- John: Well, we didn't see the hospital until later in the war when we got down around Kissingen [Germany] down in there, the bigger place. But I—they just were field hospitals, basically. Take the crew off and get them to a—
- Jim: That served those four squadrons? Probably.
- John: Yeah, right. But then they go to—I don't know where they went—Paris or someplace like that, where they had bigger hospitals for injuries.
- Jim: Oh yeah. Right, well, they had general hospitals there.
- John: Yeah, but I never came across anything up close. Nobody was injured on our plane.
- Jim: Uh-huh.
- John: The closest I got was about that far away. I got a hole about that big right up here.
- Jim: What did that sound like when that came through? Did it go through and through?
- John: Yeah.
- Jim: Went through the other side of the plane?
- John: Didn't hit any cables or anything in the plane so that's all right, but—

- Jim: You were sort of locked in on being a tail gunner, though, weren't you? I mean you couldn't move right or—
- John: Well, I could back up, you know, out of the—but I wasn't at a turret. You were reaching through—
- Jim: You were in a sitting position in that thing?
- John: Kneeling most of the time.
- Jim: Kneeling?
- John: Yeah, and then they'd read through and run your gun like this with the scope your—it was—when you're aiming, you know, you're looking through this scope right here, and then you'd run them without turning your hands and lift them up and down like this.
- Jim: So how many did you shoot down, John?
- John: I didn't shoot any down. I didn't see that many.
- Jim: Didn't you?
- John: No, but as that was at the end of the war mostly—
- Jim: Right, so—
- John: In the last—
- Jim: But mostly what you did see were Messerschmitts I assume.
- John: Yea, we saw some jets.
- Jim: Oh really?
- John: A few.
- Jim: You wouldn't see them very long.
- John: No, and I saw most of them on the ground, going up. That was the best way.
- Jim: Oh.
- John: After the war.

- Jim: Yeah, I was going to say—tell me, now, I want to get back to what I really wanted to get into. Tell me about a typical mission. Did you try to bomb airfields? Of course, it's towards the end of the war. You probably did a lot of that.
- John: Not so much airfields we were just trying marshalling yards and bridges, because we were kinda ahead of the troops—the line, you know, the front line. And that was more support to the troops. Wittenberg was the worst one we ever saw, and that was just outside of Berlin.
- Jim: Tell me about that.
- John: Well, that one was flack mostly, and it was black, and when we went in, they couldn't drop the bombs the first run because of clouds. So we had to circle around and do it again.
- Jim: Wonderful.
- John: But they did get rid of the bombs, finally. But that was a—they had a lot of planes shot down that day.
- Jim: If they hadn't found a hole in those clouds would they just drop the bombs wherever?
- John: Well, we had secondary targets. Then they would have gone someplace else.
- Jim: Yeah, but you'd have to have enough fuel for that too, though, yeah?
- John: Well, it would have been in the area.
- Jim: Probably around there?
- John: Yeah. That was the worst one, because that one, you could almost walk on it that day.
- Jim: The flack?
- John: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: And you're at what, about 8,000?
- John: Well probably 9, 10,000—10,000.
- Jim: Mm-hmm.

- John: —somewhere in there.
- Jim: Was your bombardier pretty good do you think? Or could you never tell, or—?
- John: Well, they had these pictures like that later. But what we did was—most of them were toggliers, you know. They would have one man at the controls in the head ship. He'd show and they'd all flip off of him. [Toggler—military term for an enlisted crew member of a plane selected to sit in the bombardier's position and timely trip the switch when the lead plane dropped its bombs.]
- Jim: Oh, I see. Watch him. When his bombs went, we'd all drop.
- John: And then that would be spread bombs, you know.
- Jim: Right, okay.
- John: —formation, so that's why you saw all those holes all over, you know.
- Jim: Right. Well, you'd have to put your best bombardier, then, in the lead plane.
- John: Well, that usually was the, you know, a colonel or something or other, a major or something.
- Jim: A major? A bombardier—
- John: Well, no, the lead man.
- Jim: Oh yeah.
- John: You know, the squadron commander and all those colonels and stuff.
- Jim: They'd be flying it, though. Yeah, of course there'd be nobody to blame, then, if they [laughs]—
- John: No, and they'd probably had more missions too. They'd been over there longer, you know, the leaders.
- Jim: There's a lot of complaints about the B-26. What do you know about that?
- John: Well it wasn't supposed to fly, I guess, originally.
- Jim: Well, at the academy, they said their wings were too short and they tend to flip. Did you have any experience at all?

- John: We never had any trouble with them. Uh-uh.
- Jim: I knew a guy who was a B-26 pilot here last year. He became slightly hysterical when I mentioned this, because he's quite insistent that the plane was not unstable and there was no problem. And he thought that that was over-drawn, the whole thing.
- John: I think that when they first started they had trouble. You know, when they were developing them.
- Jim: Yeah, I think what they did was they lengthened the wings.
- John: They did, I think a foot or two, yeah.
- Jim: They put a couple of feet on each end and then that stopped that problem.
- John: No, that was a good plane. I never had any—
- Jim: It had a good record.
- John: Yeah, I never seen any, you know, real problems with it.
- Jim: The plane is very similar to the A-20.
- John: Yeah.
- Jim: Can you recall the difference between those two, or when the performance—or one way or another—
- John: No, I don't. I can't, because the A-20 was just about the crew of about two to three—I don't remember which—but it was a small—
- Jim: Smaller than your plane?
- John: Yeah. We'd carry a bigger crew. But I never flew in one. So, I can't be—I can't tell you much about that.
- Jim: Sure, well I didn't know when you talked to others—
- John: Well, I seen them on the ground and all that, but I never flew with them or anything.
- Jim: Mm-hmm.
- John: That came later, actually, towards the end of the war.

Jim: Yeah, yeah, they carried over into Korea. I saw a lot of those in Korea.

John: Yeah.

Jim: Those A-20s and the B-26 is just is not to be seen much after that.

John: No, they were gone.

Jim: After World War II they were generally gone. The only time I seen them now is up at Oshkosh.

John: If you could find one there, yeah.

Jim: Right, yeah. They're pretty rare because they didn't make a hell of a lot of them.

John: 17s to 24s they had a lot of, which were good planes.

Jim: Yeah, but they were a lot bigger and different—

John: Oh, yeah they used to go over in the morning and we'd see them up 28,000 feet going over, and we'd make a mission or so and come back, and they'd still be coming back at supper time [laughs]. They'd go way in deep.

Jim: Yeah, those are long missions.

John: Yeah.

Jim: Most of the—

John: And they'd come out of England, too, most of the time.

Jim: Yeah, right, they were in England, but their missions were generally eight hours long.

John: Oh yeah.

Jim: Or ten hours sometimes when they went further into Germany.

John: Yeah.

Jim: Boy, that's a long day.

John: You just got to—

Jim: You ever know a Rupert Cornelius? You know the Cornelius who has a store in Hilldale? That's his daughter.

John: Oh yeah, no, I don't.

Jim: Well her father, Rupert, is a good friend of mine and he flew B-17s and he—

John: Well, he knows what it's all about.

Jim: Yeah, and he flew his 30—well I'd say well over 25—missions. But he said he used to put a carton of cigarettes down and start that mission, and between he and the co-pilot, that was gone when they got back.

John: I can believe it.

Jim: They smoked a carton of cigarettes, he and the co-pilot, in eight hours.

John: Yeah. They had it a lot worse, harder and tougher than we did. Because we were—missions were shorter.

Jim: Well, I think they were easier to shoot down than you. They didn't go as fast.

John: Yeah. Well, they had wanted to go in deeper too, and then they had fighters too, sometimes.

Jim: Yeah. Towards the end of the war, when the 51s arrived, then the savior of the bombing program got really—

John: They had support and protection.

Jim: Generally your missions would start when? At eight in the morning, ten in the morning? Earlier?

John: Oh, six, seven o'clock.

Jim: Six o'clock.

John: Probably get out of bed about four-thirty, five o'clock, and then you had to go to briefing.

Jim: They'd brief you. You eat first?

John: Yeah, I had breakfast, then—

Jim: Food was generally good?

John: It was fine. I survived. It was ok. Better, much better—

Jim: That's not an overly glowing endorsement.

John: Well I don't remember, but it was you know—

Jim: But it was cooked at least.

John: It was cooked and it was warm. Better than some infantry man eating K-rations.

Jim: I understand. All or nothing. Yeah, right.

John: No, we didn't have it that bad.

Jim: So, you'd go to chow and then to briefing?

John: Yeah, and then we'd—

Jim: You'd eat and you were up and at 'em.

John: We were up on the line and then the plane and then taxiing out and that.

Jim: And then you'd be home from *that* mission what? By noon?

John: Probably. Probably one o'clock, two o'clock. We may go back again—

Jim: I was going to say you still had time for a second mission that same day.

John: Yeah, depending upon what they're after, yeah.

Jim: That must have been pretty fatiguing having two missions a day—or not?

John: Well I was young, then. I would hate to try it now [laughs]. But that way was tiresome, yeah. But we didn't have oxygen, and if we got up to 10, to 12, to 14,000 feet, it was a little harder, you know.

Jim: Yeah, but generally you weren't that high, you said.

John: No, nine usually ten.

Jim: I was think—

John: Sometimes we'd go a little higher.

Jim: I would think that'd make a difference in your performance if you didn't have to have that oxygen mask hanging on you.

John: Oh yeah.

Jim: Be easier to see and easier to use that gun.

John: Yeah, but, well, otherwise they'd had all this equipment all over the bases.

Jim: Yeah, right.

John: Heavier and warmer clothes, too. We didn't have to wear a heavy suit.

Jim: Electric suits.

John: That's true.

Jim: Yeah. Frostbite was a big problem in the big bombers that flew high.

John: Well, it's 30, 40 below, wasn't it? Something like that.

Jim: 25, 40 below. Something in that range.

John: Yeah.

Jim: Yeah, it was difficult duty.

John: Yep, and I respect those people.

Jim: Uh-huh.

John: I'm trying to think of something else interesting.

Jim: You have—did you get any leave? Go into Paris and charm some ladies, John?

John: Went into Paris. Yeah, I was faster then [laughs]. No I—we were on a three day pass.

Jim: I didn't think you had to be very fast in those days.

John: In Paris?

Jim: In Paris, no. You had to be able to fight them off.

John: That's about right. We stayed at the La Grande Hotel.

Jim: Wonder where that is.

John: And Eisenhower Strait is where they crossed the street at that time.

Jim: Right.

John: And I saw—it was nice to see Eisenhower come out one day and get in the car. That was kinda a thrill. But then we had a three day pass and we took a 6X6 truck—I can remember that—all the way to Paris. I think it was fifty miles on that wooden seat. And we got to Paris and I didn't really want to sit down for a while. But it was nice to see that, too.

Jim: How did the locals treat you, there?

John: Paris, the French people? Fine, there was no problem?

Jim: Did you find something to eat and drink there easily?

John: Paris?

Jim: Uh-huh.

John: Oh yeah, yeah. There was plenty of everything that you wanted. We just went sight-seeing, a couple of guys from the crew and I.

Jim: No dance-hall activities? Or they didn't have those?

John: No, they didn't. We didn't do that. We were just looking at the Eiffel Tower and a few things like that, you know.

Jim: Being good boys.

John: Fairly good, yeah.

Jim: Yeah.

John: We'd taken in the sights.

Jim: Yeah that's good. Paris is probably full of GIs then. In 1945, after the war was over, there must have been still plenty of them around.

John: Oh yeah. I never got that. It was during the war when I got to Paris, later, we ended up in Munich and—

Jim: Munich, yeah. After the war?

John: On the way home. Yeah.

Jim: How long were you in Munich?

John: Oh, just for a couple of weeks and then we came back to Marseilles on the train.

Jim: But you didn't have anything to do in Munich, did you?

John: No, they were just waiting to ship us home. And then we got on boxcars that was forty and eight. And I don't remember how many days it was. A couple of nights on the boxcars—we slept on those going to Marseilles on the way home. Then we left Marseilles I think it was December 13th. We got—Christmas morning, we hit the Statue of Liberty. And that was a thrill. And we were home and back here in Madison to celebrate New Year's Eve, so that was quick.

Jim: Yeah, that was pretty quick.

John: In fact, you were on the train when we came home. I ran into you.

Jim: You're kidding?

John: Do you remember that? No, you were on the train. I remember that. Lacey and I, we were on the—we had a few drinks at—in Milwaukee with a bunch—because we were at a party, you know. They were going in Milwaukee, or whatever, around there—

Jim: Right.

John: —so then we carried our barracks bags down to the Milwaukee Depot and got on a train, and you were on there. You must have been with your mother or somebody. Anyway, with a couple of other people.

Jim: Really?

John: Yep.

Jim: Boy, I have no recollection of that.

John: Yeah, I do.

Jim: Well, you got a good memory.

John: For some things.

Jim: For ugly faces [both laugh].

John: Yeah, after—

Jim: Well, I used to ride the train from Madison to Milwaukee a lot.

John: Yeah.

Jim: That was when I was at Great Lakes, at—usually I'd either hitch-hike home from Great Lakes, and hitch-hiking was fairly easy in that days. If you're in uniform, you got a good ride. ["Great Lakes" refers to the US Naval station at Great Lakes, Illinois, north of Chicago.]

John: Yeah.

Jim: Or else, I took the [unintelligible] in, and I also had to see a girl in Milwaukee. Then I'd be at that North Shore, that rambling wreck that would go about eight thousand miles an hour. Scare you to death [laughs]. An electric train, you know. Away, oh Jesus, ninety miles an hour up to Milwaukee. And come home from there, I usually take the Milwaukee Road Train. It came frequently to Madison. So, that's probably what I was on.

John: You must have, because we took the North Shore from Fort Sheridan.

Jim: Fort Sheridan the same thing, yeah. Boy that's—

John: Then walk down the hill to the Milwaukee Road Depot there.

Jim: Yeah, right. That's the one thing I remember more than anything else about being at Great Lakes was that train. That North Shore, woof, did that go fast. And it looked—felt like it was going to come apart.

John: It wasn't too sturdy looking.

Jim: No.

John: But they held a lot of people, boy.

Jim: It sure did, and it was just like this continual thing. Just car after car after car full of soldiers and sailors, either from Sheridan or from Great Lakes or that left Glencoe, the air base there, right along the path that a lot of

those air guys would get on that same train. And because it didn't make many stops.

John: Most of those trains you were sitting on your suitcase. You couldn't get a seat.

Jim: Oh, I never got a seat. I don't ever remember sitting down because you're always still—as you still got on and they just shoved you on. It's just—

John: I remember from Fort Myers—that's where I was with the gunnery. That's where my sister was married to Joe Collins, and he was at Key West, and I got a three day pass, and I went down to Key West, and I never did see anything. I rode up standing up, all the way down, all the way back, hanging onto the strap, you know [both laugh].

Jim: Right.

John: Oh I don't know how far it is. Must be ninety miles, isn't it? Or something?

Jim: If you looked out the window once, that'd be enough, because—

John: It's all water.

Jim: Well, it's just all water, and it's—

John: All bridges.

Jim: —on either side. Yeah, it's a nice drive 150 miles from Miami down to Key West.

John: Is it?

Jim: It's a nice drive. I've done it several times, but the sights aren't much [laughs].

John: Well, I didn't see much, you know, standing up [laughs].

Jim: It's a great place to go fishing, all those towns. Yeah, Marathon is where I used to fish down there. [Marathon is a fishing town located in the Florida Keys.]

John: Oh yeah.

Jim: Great fishing in Marathon. There's a guy there who ran a restaurant and—Ziggy's, and Ziggy's was the place to eat, and we went there several times

when I was down one winter. And we got to talking to him and find out he comes from Milwaukee [laughs]. You know, I thought he was one of the locals, you know. He comes from Milwaukee. Retired down there, and he got bored, and he started this restaurant. But, boy, did he have seafood!

John: Nice and fresh down there.

Jim: But it was just very, very special. He was—I don't know what the hell ever happened to him. I haven't been down there in years.

John: Sounds like a Milwaukee name, Ziggy.

Jim: Yeah, right.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

John: One time with my son, we stopped—

Jim: They got some out there. I've seen them.

John: Yeah. But I have—I have—I haven't actually gone to the show up here at Oshkosh.

Jim: Mm hmm. That's a great show up there.

John: Yeah, I know, but I don't like that many people.

Jim: I'm sorry?

John: I said I don't like that big of crowd.

Jim: Oh, well, that is a problem.

John: Yeah, so I try think of something more interesting.

Jim: Although, let me ask you one more—did you think the training you got as an aerial gunner was adequate for the job? Or did you have to learn a lot on the—when you were presented with the problem?

John: I think they did a good job of training people in the schools.

Jim: You felt confident with the gun and all that?

John: We never had any problems and everything worked all right. We were able to repair anything that was—you know, correct anything that was broken or malfunctioned, and everybody was—you know, we were—

- Jim: The armored belts generally worked well? They didn't jam often or—
- John: Oh, you'd get jammed now and then, but, you know, they'd be—
- Jim: Easily corrected?
- John: —corrected, yes. And, I don't know, I think everybody was trained pretty well.
- Jim: Mm hmm.
- John: It was a good experience now that it's over, but I certainly am disappointed in some people that allow the flag to be burnt. Like a couple of senators we got here I'm not too pleased with, and things like that still bother me today.
- Jim: Yeah, well, yeah, then you're probably for John McCain. You see, and we're gonna have trouble. I don't think he's going to make it.
- John: I don't think he'll make it, but as—I wish he would.
- Jim: Vote for him. I wish he would too.
- John: Yeah, think maybe he'll run as an independent?
- Jim: No, I don't think so. He doesn't have enough money for that. I mean, it's a good idea, but it won't work.
- John: Yeah, no. I wish that—I wish he'd get in, but I don't think he'd make it either.
- Jim: All right.
- John: Okay.
- Jim: We'll give you a rest there, and thank you very much, John.
- John: Yeah, well, I hope I helped you out a little bit.
- Jim: You did.
- New voice: Sir, may I ask you a question?
- John: Sure.

New voice: I'm sorry. My name is Ivan Hannibal. I work here as a researcher—

[End of interview]