

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ELMER HOMBURG
Navigator, Air Force, World War II.

2001

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Homburg, Elmer L., (1921-2011). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 50 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Elmer L. Homburg, a Cottage Grove, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a navigator and bombardier in the Army Air Corps with the 466th Bomb Group in Europe. Homburg relates joining the Reserve Officers Training Corps while attending the University of Wisconsin, being activated as a sergeant in the infantry, and basic training at Camp Wolters (Texas). He talks about being separated from a great group of trainees due to hospitalization for an infected lung and a recovery furlough, so he decided to transfer to the Air Force. After preflight school at San Antonio and navigation training at San Marcos, Homburg discusses combat training on B-24s at Casper (Wyoming) and being airsick on training flights. Shipped overseas to Attlebridge Air Force Base (Norwich, England) in February of 1945, he touches on assignment to the 785th Squadron. He describes his missions, including dropping napalm around Bordeaux (France) and bombing the German general staff headquarters at Zossen (Germany). He comments on having bombardier duties as well as doing navigation, wearing glasses on combat missions, and convincing command there was anti-aircraft fire at Nienburg. Homburg recalls seeing one of his friends' planes get shot down and characterizes his own crew. Assigned to practice at a radio range in Wales on V-E Day, he tells how his crew flew to London (England) instead to watch the celebrations from the air. After V-E Day, Homburg speaks of taking ground crews on low-altitude sight-seeing flights over Germany. He touches upon his flight back to the United States through bad weather, using dead reckoning, living conditions on the air base, and the efforts of a colonel from Milwaukee to get the Bomb Group to always stay in formation. When the base was to be disbanded, Homburg talks about how the money tied up in the officer's club was spent. He comments on the presence of the Red Cross, lack of formal entertainment on the base, availability of alcohol, and having limited time off base in England. Homburg addresses his use of the GI Bill, his homecoming on a train, and a career teaching at Madison East High School.

Biographical Sketch:

Homburg (1921-2011) served during World War II with the 785th Squadron, 466th Bomb Group. He grew up on a farm in Cottage Grove (Wisconsin) and earned his Bachelors and Masters Degrees in education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He flew twenty-five missions during World War II, retired from the Air Force Reserves at the rank of major in 1981, settled in Madison (Wisconsin) with his wife, Jean, and

raised four children. Homburg spent thirty-seven years teaching at Madison East High School, was named as an Outstanding Secondary Educator of America in 1974, and served on the Employee Trust Funds Board, State Teachers Retirement Board, and State of Wisconsin Investment Board.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001
Transcribed by Michael Kerins, 2011
Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

- James: There we go. So, where were you born, sir?
- Elmer: Cottage Grove, Wisconsin.
- James: In what year?
- Elmer: 1921.
- James: And what were you doing before the war?
- Elmer: Before the war I was a student at the University of Wisconsin. I graduated from East High School and then started the University of Wisconsin. I was in the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], and called to active duty after three years of ROTC.
- James: Three years [of] ROTC?
- Elmer: Yeah. Then I was called to active duty.
- James: Tell me about the timeframe here. Is this still pre-war?
- Elmer: Oh, yeah. Well, that was 19—I entered university in 1940, so I went into service active duty in 1943.
- James: Huh. Oh, 1943?
- Elmer: Mm-hmm.
- James: Okay. Then you went in as a second lieutenant?
- Elmer: No. I went in as a sergeant in the infantry.
- James: I thought ROTC training was supposed to make you an officer.
- Elmer: Well, it would've in four years, but you see, we didn't get a chance to complete the four years.
- James: With all your experience, though, I guess that they took you in as a sergeant. That shows there was some appreciation of what you had been through.
- Elmer: Oh, yeah. We went in—the entire infantry unit went—third year ROTC went in as a unit to an infantry replacement training center at Camp Wolters.

James: Where was that?

Elmer: That was in Mineral Wells, Texas. A funny thing happened there. We got there a week early for that training, for the rest of the battalion to come in for—to begin training. So the captain told one of his corporals to go out and give us—start to give us some close-order drill, so he went out there and explained some simple maneuver. Barked the command—click, bang [hits fists], ya know! It was just to do that. Pretty soon the captain was lookin' out the window. He saw that, so he came out and give us a close-order drill. By that time, a colonel walked by, and he looked at this group of recruits that come in and really knew what they were doing. So it was a full colonel giving us close-order drill. He said, “God, you guys don’t belong here.” [laughs].

But we were supposed to go through basic training there. Then I got an infected lung and I went on sick call on Saturday night, so that I thought I would be then ready for duty again on Monday morning, but they wouldn’t release me from the hospital. They put me on KP [Kitchen Patrol] for a week, took another X-ray, and the infected lung had cleared up, and then they put me to bed for a week. Ah, and then they offered me a furlough, and I said, “I’ll give up the furlough if you let me stay with my group.” No way, I had to take a furlough. So when I got back after the furlough, my group, of course, had gone way on ahead, and I went in with a bunch of hillbillies. And just then the Air Force was in desperate need of flying officers, and they opened it to third year infantry ROTC. So I went to the Air Force.

And I had just started my preflight work in San Antonio when the order came down that anyone who hasn’t—any third year infantry ROTC that hasn’t yet started preflight, go back to the infantry. But I was a week into preflight, so I stayed in the Air Force.

James: So what was your next training mission?

Elmer: After San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center for preflight, we went to San Marcos for navigation school. I was qualified for all three: pilot, bombardier, and navigator, and the interviewer said, “I imagine you want to be a pilot.” And I says, “No way; I wanna be a navigator.” Math was my field. And he says, “You got it!” [James laughs] So I went into navigation training at San Marcos, and from there to combat training in Casper, Wyoming.

James: Okay. When did you get your airplane?

- Elmer: Uh, you mean the combat plane? I was at combat training in Casper, then we went over to England.
- James: I don't know what kind of a plane you're on now.
- Elmer: Oh, it was a B-24.
- James: A B-24?
- Elmer: Yeah. And at that time that was considered a heavy bomber.
- James: I see. So you began with this same crew in Wyoming?
- Elmer: Yeah. The crew was assembled in Wyoming.
- James: I see. How long was navigator training?
- Elmer: Ah, I think it was about twenty-one weeks—something, twenty weeks, twenty-one weeks.
- James: Was it very intense or difficult?
- Elmer: Oh, yes. Yeah, it was. Funny thing. They had a rule that any time if you got airsick, that was alright, but you didn't dare quit work. If you didn't quit work, they wouldn't pay any attention to being airsick. Well, I was airsick on seventeen of twenty-three missions. But by God, they weren't gonna wash me out. And then I never got airsick in combat at all.
- James: Well, you were too busy to throw up.
- Elmer: Yeah, too busy and too cold. See, down there in Texas it was so *damn* hot, ya know, a hundred and twenty—
- James: I see. It sort of encouraged it, you think.
- Elmer: Yeah, oh sure.
- James: Okay. So you got to be a navigator. That gave you an officer's [unintelligible, both talking].
- Elmer: Yeah. A commission as a first lieutenant—uh, as a second lieutenant in the reserve.
- James: Right. So where did we go now that you've got your airplane and a crew?

Elmer: Well, we got the crew there. We went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, for shipment overseas. We went over on a banana boat.

James: Oh, you didn't fly?

Elmer: No, we didn't fly over. And we arrived in England, and those assigned to the—my crew was assigned to the 785th.

James: Squadron?

Elmer: Squadron. 466th Bomb Group. 466th Bomb.

James: But your squadron was the—?

Elmer: 785th.

James: 785?

Elmer: Yeah.

James: Bomb Squadron. Okay, where was that? Do you recall? In England?

Elmer: Pardon?

James: Where was that in England?

Elmer: Norwich.

James: Norwich?

Elmer: Yeah. Attlebridge Air Force Base. It's the only base that's still intact over there, but it's a turkey farm now. They're using the revetments to keep the turkeys off the ground. But it is the most complete air base still over there.

James: Last year I was over to Duxford to see the museum there. That's a big air base. Have you been there, near Cambridge?

Elmer: No.

James: Huge airbase. The United States has a museum in that base. It's very nice. So when did you arrive in England?

Elmer: It was in February of '45, just at the tail end.

James: Two forty-five?

Elmer: Yup.

James: Okay. And you started your missions, or it was there more training before you started?

Elmer: No, then we—we had maybe one, one or two flights, practice flights. But then we were sent out to missions.

James: How many missions did you have eventually?

Elmer: I had twenty-five.

James: You did complete your twenty-five?

Elmer: Well, at that particular time a tour of duty was actually thirty-five missions.

James: I know. They upped it at the end of the war.

Elmer: Yeah. They upped it. It depended on the attrition rate. Twenty-five missions was when there was a four percent loss on every mission. So twenty-five missions times four percent; you were dead after twenty-five missions.

James: You had to die; otherwise, the books didn't work.

Elmer: Yeah [laughs]! True enough. I had twenty-five missions.

James: Okay. And this was towards the end of the war, and were your missions primarily to France or to Germany?

Elmer: Primarily to Germany, although we had two missions down to Bordeaux, France. The French couldn't get the Germans out of the area around Bordeaux. That was funny, because, see, this was a B-24 heavy bomber base. And they were starting to haul in P-38 [Lockheed P-38 Lightning] gas tanks. And we couldn't figure out what in the hell do you want P-38 gas tanks on a bomber base for. Well—and of course, they wouldn't tell us. They cut the tail end off of that bomber base—off of that fuel tank and welded a plate in front of it. And every month we got a three day pass. And when that three day pass came up, the crew was standing in front of the gauges waiting for that twelve o'clock to get across—we didn't know what they were gonna do with those P-38 gas tanks. Well, we got so damn hungry at the end of the three day pass, we came back a few hours early to get something to

eat. But the damn P-38 gas tanks were still there. So finally one afternoon, we got a call to come down to a briefing. That was it. We had to help take those P-38 gas tanks down to Bordeaux. They were filled with napalm. And we were supposed to drop them on the, on the Germans down there. And the next day, the French walked right through. They didn't have any problem. We burned 'em out of there.

James: So you did have a chance to use 'em?

Elmer: Oh, yeah! We used 'em. But it was funny—the damn things were [laughs]!

James: They have no fins on 'em at all!

Elmer: No, no fins on 'em. They were tail-over or teakettle all over the place.

James: From what height did you drop those?

Elmer: Aw, it wasn't over—I doubt if we were up to eight thousand feet.

James: Pretty low.

Elmer: Yeah, pretty low.

James: They could shoot you down at that level.

Elmer: Yeah, except that they didn't have any equipment either, other than their infantry equipment that they had down there.

James: And that's not a usual spot to protect for the Germans, was it?

Elmer: No, no. It was right around Bordeaux.

James: That must've been a hell of a fire you guys created.

Elmer: [laughs] Yeah, it was! It was funny to watch those bombs go down, though. They were fishtailing.

James: Zigzagging about?

Elmer: Pardon?

James: Zigzagging about?

Elmer: Yeah [laughs]. Tumbling and everything else.

- James: Right. They didn't have any igniters on 'em, or how did they ignite?
- Elmer: They had a—I don't know how they ignited, they—
- James: But there was something on 'em?
- Elmer: Yeah, that ignited them.
- James: If it had just been in a plain container, it wouldn't have exploded, right?
- Elmer: No, no, no. It wouldn't've. They had to be ignited.
- James: With some kind of a gun or—okay. And, so tell me about your missions over Germany and getting shot at that way. Did you [unintelligible] many airplanes?
- Elmer: I had a good buddy shot off my wing, although we were very, very fortunate that we weren't hit. The biggest raid I was on, the Russians found out where the German general staff headquarters was. It was at Zossen, southeast of Berlin. They called for a maximum effort and we sent fifteen hundred heavy bombers and one thousand fighters after this one little village. And it was just a goddamn river that was there. The fighters were a tunnel and we were flying right through it. And that wasn't—we were one of the lead squadrons in the second division over the target. Ah, so the rest of the second division and all of the third division followed. And the first division was already over when we got there and we couldn't see the target for smoke and dirt and so on, but we keep pouring it in there because they knew they were underground and we were supposed to dig 'em out, I guess.
- James: The bombs were placed where everything was supposed to go?
- Elmer: Yeah, where they were supposed to go.
- James: Okay. As a navigator, did you have any other responsibilities besides finding your way home?
- Elmer: Oh, yeah. In our combat training in Casper, Wyoming, the bombardier that was assigned to our crew was such a screw-up that they didn't send him overseas, and they called me down to headquarters, told me I had forty-eight hours to become a bombardier. [James laughs] Jesus, that was awful. But my bombardiering duties was strictly toggling off of the lead.
- James: Watch the lead pilot and just do what he does [laughs]?

- Elmer: Yeah, yeah.
- James: But I mean, did you have any responsibilities with a weapon, though? That's not part of the navigator's job?
- Elmer: No, no, no, no. No, I—the nose gunner was right behind me. I stood, [and] rode backwards the entire mission. Had a desk, it was wider than this [indicating size]. I worked on the desk. The thing probably that was unusual about my mission, because I firmly believe that I was the only [zipper sound] enlisted man or officer that flew an entire tour of duty wearing glasses.
- James: Oh, really?
- Elmer: [Papers shifting] I brought this along. I thought maybe you might be interested in it.
- James: Oh yeah, I'd like to copy this.
- Elmer: No, you can have that one.
- James: Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. How did they allow the glasses?
- Elmer: If I took my glasses off, I could pass a test within the first five minutes. If they'd've made me keep my glasses off for fifteen minutes, I—hell, I would never have seen the chart on the wall.
- James: Well, I'm sure after you got to England they didn't care.
- Elmer: No, they provided me with glasses. I still have the glasses I wore in combat.
- James: You didn't have trouble with the fighter planes. By that time, the P-51s were protecting you pretty well, weren't they?
- Elmer: Yeah, within range. We went in pretty deep into Czechoslovakia sometimes. They were a little bit beyond our range, but by and large we had pretty good fighter protection.
- James: And anti-aircraft guns?
- Elmer: Oh yeah, that was funny.
- James: Tell me about those.

- Elmer: We were routed into our target, zigzagging, you know, to avoid certain things, but they always routed us over Nienburg, and every time there was a one-armed Schultz (??) down there that would fire at us. We'd get back and report, "We got shot at at Nienburg." "No, no, no, there's no flak at Nienburg." "Yeah, we got shot at at Nienburg." [laughs]. Well finally they came out and said, "Possible flak at Nienburg." [laughs] But we got shot at every time we went over the place. The one-armed Schultz down there was firing up at us.
- James: What's that?
- Elmer: Well, he had a battery of anti-aircraft guns down there, and he just had one battery, and he fired the thing once, and by the time he reloaded we were out of range already. I guess.
- James: So he just got one shot at you?
- Elmer: Yeah, one or two shots is all, at every squadron, yeah.
- James: Eighty-eights, I assume?
- Elmer: Pardon?
- James: Eighty-eights, I assume they were shooting?
- Elmer: Yeah.
- James: But you were saying the plane on your left, you say, you lost on one of your missions?
- Elmer: Yeah, yeah. We lost a—I lost a number of good friends off, off my wings.
- James: Were they captured or did they not make it?
- Elmer: Some of 'em made it back. The engineer was very badly burned; when I saw him, the skin had grown over the end of his mouth. They hadda do something to get his mouth the full width again. The navigator in that particular crew LA Dies Cruise(??), the pilot got back, and the engineer got back, but the rest of 'em died.
- James: Yeah. Well, that's too bad.
- Elmer: Yeah.

- James: Did you have a good crew?
- Elmer: We had an excellent crew. My tail gunner flew his first mission—I think it was on his eighteenth birthday—Ambrose Guy Luceedy (?). Every pilot over there wanted him to fly with their crew, but he wouldn't fly with anybody else, but he wouldn't stay on the ground if we were flying. One day he had a terrible case of the GIs [gastrointestinal illness]. He wouldn't report it, he wouldn't stay on the ground, so he was up in the air, and he filled his flak helmet full of crap, and when it [was] “bombs away” he threw that away, too. [laughs]
- James: Helmet and all?
- Elmer: Helmet and all.
- James: Have you kept track of the crew?
- Elmer: To some extent. My pilot just died a few years ago. I still correspond with the copilot. And I still correspond with one of the waist gunners. The others I've lost track of.
- James: Well, you said after twenty-five missions, then what did they—when was this in terms of the war?
- Elmer: That was at V-E Day [Victory in Europe Day].
- James: That's when you finished?
- Elmer: Yup.
- James: So afterwards, what was your assignment then?
- Elmer: Well, then the first assignment we got after—oh! We had what we called a “streetcar mission” after that. In that, we were supposed to take our—load our ground crew—ground crews on the plane—and take 'em on sight-seeing tours over Germany so that they could see what they had contributed to. So we would fly over the bombed out cities at a very low altitude, and these ground crews—
- James: [Interrupting] You were at what, five thousand feet?
- Elmer: Oh, lower than that. Down to maybe a thousand.
- James: Oh, my. Scare everybody on the ground.

Elmer: Well, it was after V-E Day, so there wasn't any shooting at us anymore, and they could see it a lot better, you know, from that altitude. They appreciated that and it was one way to keep us trained.

Then the next thing was that we were supposed to—we were assigned to go over to Wales, preparatory to flying home, to practice on a radio range. So we flew over to Wales. The pilot flew through the radio range once and he says, "Hell, that's nothin' new." And the copilot flew through it once and he says, "I don't need any training on this." We were supposed to practice there for four hours. Pilot got the idea, "To hell with this, let's go to London." This was V-E Day. So I gave him a heading. But he misunderstood. And I turned on civilian radio, I was enjoying the radio, and he was on the wrong heading. We flew damn near into a balloon barrage. And so I had to quick get my position again and the new heading into London. We got into London. We found—

James: Did they object to you landing there?

Elmer: We didn't land. We stayed in the air.

James: They didn't expect you there.

Elmer: No. We weren't supposed to be there. We found Buckingham Palace, and we flew around and around and around the goddamn Buckingham Palace. And the crowd was so thick around there. My squadron navigator was in the crowd. And he said he was pressed so hard—he was a little short guy—he said there were times that his feet didn't hit—weren't on the ground, he was just pressed so hard. He knew that that plane circling up there was from the 785th, but he couldn't get the call letter, so he didn't know what crew it was. But he knew it was his squadron. And he mentioned it back there. Of course, my log showed we were in Wales all the time.

James: Of course [both laugh].

Elmer: And that was an interesting experience.

James: I'll bet it was. So then you went back and ended up in Wales like you were supposed to?

Elmer: No, then we went—we flew home from London and back. And then from there we were assigned to go over to Wales and take off from Wales to fly back to the U.S. We were to take our own crew and an equal number of ground personnel, so we had basically a double crew to fly back. So we flew from Wales to Iceland, from Iceland to

Labrador, Goose Bay. Then Goose Bay down to Boston. It was rather interesting, the flight from Iceland to Goose Bay. We had to fly through a very bad front. And there was a radio range on the coast of Labrador—we homed in on that, flew across that. Pilot asked me to compute a way to get into Goose Bay then. I gave him a heading and told him, “When the radio compass has a certain reading on it, home in on the radio compass.” And we were still in the clouds, and they started in on radio on that heading, homing in on that radio beam and dropping down out of the clouds, and we came out right over a fjord that lead right into the base. Pilot says, “Homburg, you know what’s bothering me?” “What, Neil?” “Not a damn thing.” And, oh, you could feel the throttle going forward. [laughs]

James: You hit it right in the mark.

Elmer: Right on the money! And the weather was closing in fast, and we got in, we landed very nicely, but there was a plane that came in, oh, twenty minutes later that couldn’t find the runway, the weather was so bad. Finally, on one pass, he did see the runway, but he was already halfway the length of the runway. He just cut the throttle—*boom*, down he went. He dropped it on the runway, off the end of the runway, down a goddamn hill, over the rocks and everything else; couldn’t see the plane at all. He unloaded the plane from all of the crew and they climbed up the hill, and then he’d lock one wheel, gun the engine on the other side, and that goddamned B-24 climbed back up over those rocks back up on the runway. And the next day it was ready for flying [laughs]! It was unbelievable!

James: You would think something would be bent enough to keep it from—

Elmer: Damaged enough to—the landing gear, ya know, with its damn strut down there. And he was just bouncin’ over the rocks at the end of the runway. That was amazing to us.

James: As a navigator, did you have to learn to shoot the sun and all that old-fashioned stuff?

Elmer: Oh, yes.

James: Was that hard to learn?

Elmer: No, it wasn’t that hard to learn. My field is mathematics anyways, so that was—

James: But now if it’s a cloudy day, then how did you do?

- Elmer: Well, then it was just dead reckoning and radio, or in Europe the—
- James: [Unintelligible] radio beams?
- Elmer: LORAN [Long Range Navigation] was just come out in Europe at the end of the war.
- James: When you turned to come home, then, you followed the radio signals back to England?
- Elmer: Well, that was out of range, mostly, of radio. It was a funny thing. I'm flying from Wales. We were to fly to the north end of— equivalent to the latitude of the north end of Scotland, and then take off for Iceland. And we were flying along there, and pilot gets on the intercom and says, "Homburg, I didn't know there was any islands on our course. You must be way off course." And I says, "No, there's no islands on our course." "Dammit, look out the window, you can see 'em out there." And I says, "Sure, they're out there." It's the Faroe Islands. They were a couple hundred miles off course, off the course, but they had looked like they were pretty soon. He says, "Well, what time are we supposed to hit Iceland?" And I gave him a time of arrival. "Aww, hell. You're crazy. We'll be there in a few minutes." That time of arrival was right, ya know; the weather was beautiful and you could see, ya know, from that height, you could see so damn far. He couldn't believe how far you can see.
- James: Did you have trouble gettin' mail and packages from home at your base?
- Elmer: No, no.
- James: That was pretty regular?
- Elmer: Yeah, that was regular.
- James: And tell me about the food on your base.
- Elmer: Excellent.
- James: Did you have a mess kit? Mess hall, and all that?
- Elmer: Excellent, excellent. Before our mission, we had our eggs fried to order, whichever way we wanted 'em. Any particular thing we wanted for breakfast. When we got back from a mission, the ground forces had captured some cognac over on the continent and of course, they didn't know how to use it, so they sent it over to the Air Force, to our

base. So they gave us a glass of cognac every time we got back from a mission.

James: What time, generally, did your mission start?

Elmer: Oh, we had to get out of bed at usually about three o'clock in the morning for a briefing.

James: Then to breakfast after briefing?

Elmer: No, before briefing. We got outta bed—

James: So you ate breakfast, then, at four, then—

Elmer: Well, about 3:30.

James: 3:30.

Elmer: And then go down to the briefing room, briefing, and out to the plane, check out the plane.

James: Did they get the navigators together as a group to talk to them at the same time?

Elmer: Yeah. There was a general briefing for the entire crew, then the pilots went to the—

James: They broke up into specialties?

Elmer: Yeah, into their specialties. And the navigators went into a separate room where they had big desks for us to do all of our plotting. All we got was the coordinates, and they—in the briefing rooms—and we had to do all the plotting on our navigation maps before we went out to the plane.

James: After you dropped your bombs, you turned for home. Somebody once said—some of the people I've talked to—said it was every man for himself once they turned around. They didn't worry about the formation, you just—every plane had to get home which way possible. Was that a unique—

Elmer: That wasn't in our case. In our case, when I got to the group in February, 466th was in last place in bombing efficiency. And we got a Colonel Filig (??) from Milwaukee. And one month later, we were in first place. He would fly up there, and he'd say, "Get that goddamn plane into formation or I'll shoot you down!" [both laugh]. And we

went deep into Czechoslovakia one time. When we came back, comin' back across the North Sea, he came out with a damn peashooter to meet us, and—

James: Trying to make sure you're still in formation?

Elmer: Still in formation. And we got back to base, and he says, "I'm proud of you." The entire squadron was in a four hundred foot cube.

James: How many planes in a squadron again?

Elmer: Ah, oh, usually about ten, twelve.

James: Twelve, uh-huh. Well, that's very good.

Elmer: He was one tough son of a gun. Another incident with this Colonel Filig, on another mission down to—in the Bordeaux area. What the hell is that? That's not the right pronunciation of it. Anyhow, there was a coastal gun. The British navy couldn't get in because of that coastal battery. So we went, we were supposed to go down and knock that out. So they sent two squadrons down there. Ours was the lead squadron, ah, and we dropped ninety-five percent of our bombs within fifty feet of the gun.

James: That ought to do it!

Elmer: That ought to do it! But the next squadron came over, and it was the same thing, ya know, they wanted to make sure they got it. But the pilot and his navigator on that plane missed the target by two miles [laughs].

James: Oh, my. Well, that made you look good.

Elmer: Oh, Christ, that run! Colonel Filig—he damn near made a hole in the roof [laughs]. That pilot and his navigator never got off the ground again. [laughs]

James: Were you lead navigator for your squadron?

Elmer: No.

James: Uh-huh.

Elmer: No, I was a—along with my other duties, of course, **[End of Tape 1, Side 1]** if we got separated from the group then it would've been on me, but—so we had to be ready to take over at any time.

James: So you were prepared to find your way home on your own if needed?

Elmer: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

James: Yeah. Well, it sounds like your training was very good for the job they asked you to do.

Elmer: Yeah. I would say it was very good.

James: And nobody—everybody got back without being hurt, so—

Elmer: That's right. And our particular—oh! My radio operator—we were short of radio operators over there, and he was called out of bed one day at three o'clock in the morning when we weren't scheduled to fly and was asked to fly radio operator with another crew. And he never came back.

James: Oh, no!

Elmer: He went down in the North Sea.

James: That was bad luck right from the start.

Elmer: That was bad luck right from the start. So we lost our radio operator, but—

James: Now how did you replace him? [unintelligible, both talking] 'cause you were hopin' to fly the next day.

Elmer: Well, yeah. Well, they had to find a radio operator from some crew that wasn't scheduled to fly. So we had several different radio operators—we had a different radio operator flying us home.

James: Most everybody was nineteen or twenty?

Elmer: Yeah, I was a grandpa; I was twenty-three.

James: Except you. You're an old man at twenty-three.

Elmer: I was an old man at twenty-three. My pilot was twenty-one, I think. My gunners were all in their teens yet. My enlisted men.

James: It's incredible, ya know. Looking back, you don't—now we think of people of that age as children. And to think what you're asked to do with equipment that complex, it's just amazing.

Elmer: Yup, it is.

James: Did you join any veterans' organizations when you got out of the service?

Elmer: I was with the American Legion for a while and then I got moved away from that particular—from Cottage Grove into Madison and I didn't keep that up. So I haven't been active with veterans' organizations.

James: Did you use your GI Bill?

Elmer: Oh, yes. Definitely.

James: What'd you do with that?

Elmer: I finished my—

James: Went to college?

Elmer: I had three years in when I was called to active duty. I came back in the late November of—

James: '45?

Elmer: —in '45. I went the second semester that year and finished up and got my degree in June of '46. I finished in one semester because I had taken some correspondence courses.

James: And what was the degree in, excuse me?

Elmer: Math education.

James: Math education. Okay.

Elmer: So I was a school teacher.

James: Then after that you got a job teaching school?

Elmer: [impact sound] Yeah. Oh, I [unintelligible].

James: That's alright. As long as it sits there. [readjusts mic] Okay, that's good. And where was that?

- Elmer: I taught one year at Poynette and then I had a chance to go back to my alma mater, Madison East, and I taught there for thirty-six years.
- James: Oh, my! That was a long stint.
- Elmer: That was a long stint. Then I had a rather interesting avocation while I was teaching there. I was chairman of the teacher's retirement board for about fifteen years, and employee trust board[?] I was either co-chair or chair for fourteen years. Then I was on the state investment board for ten years as a trustee.
- James: Well, that's interesting.
- Elmer: Yeah. That was a rather interesting thing. So I'm real close to the retirement system.
- James: Yeah, I guess so. Well, you know a great deal about it.
- Elmer: Oh, yeah.
- James: And you had—you were married after the war?
- Elmer: Yeah.
- James: Not before?
- Elmer: No, no. I didn't know my girl. I had a girlfriend during the war.
- James: She wrote you?
- Elmer: Yeah, but that didn't work out. When I got back from overseas, we landed in Boston. Then they wouldn't let us fly the plane to Detroit where it was supposed to be stored because it was war weary and not safe. So they sent us back on a train by way of New Orleans, and Montreal, and St. Louis and every damn place else along the line. So we were on the train for—oh, better than forty-eight hours from Boston to Camp Grant.
- James: I'll bet. They took the long way.
- Elmer: [laughs] They got there at three o'clock in the morning and a goddamn brass band was there to welcome us home. At three o'clock in the morning [laughs]! And I left my hat on the damn train. I've been disgusted with trains every since then, as far as that's concerned.
- James: I see. You married a local girl?

- Elmer: No, a girl I met in college at the university. She was from La Crosse.
- James: Huh. Well, that's nice. You raised a family?
- Elmer: Yeah. I raised four kids; two of 'em are M.D.s, one is a M.B.A., C.P.A., and one is trained as a teacher, trained as a nurse, but prefers to be a housewife. But they're scattered from South Carolina, Wisconsin, Colorado, and the state of Washington.
- James: My kids are spread out like that too [Homburg laughs]. That's nice. Did you get any decorations for all this in Europe?
- Elmer: Uh, yeah. Air medal. I got several clusters on that, and campaign ribbons. Uh, good conduct medal.
- James: Well, of course [laughs].
- Elmer: The air medal is the highest one I got.
- James: Right. Yeah, that's right. Okay. Umm, any other stories you didn't tell me?
- Elmer: Oh, I don't think of any just offhand. We sure enjoyed the breakfasts over there before our missions. That was unusual; when you tell other G.I.s that we had breakfast made to order, they can't believe it.
- James: You had no trouble with the eggs or the meat? You had everything you wanted?
- Elmer: Nope, no. We had everything we wanted.
- James: Yeah.
- Elmer: And the food was good.
- James: Did you have a bar that you drank at in the evening?
- Elmer: Oh, yeah.
- James: Yeah, tell me about that.
- Elmer: Oh, that was another interesting thing. The base was to be disbanded; we were supposed to go home. We had a heck of a lot of money in the officer's club. And there was a limit—England limited how much we could send out. So we gave the maximum to Red Cross and we gave

the maximum we could give to Airmen's Relief Fund. And then they still had a lot of money that they had to get rid of. So soft drinks were free, beer was threepence, and scotch was sixpence. And a sixpence was approximately a dime.

James: A dime?

Elmer: A nickel for the beer, soft drinks were free. We got rid of a lot of the money we had left.

James: Did you get into town frequently around your base?

Elmer: Not too often. We got into Norwich a few times. Norwich is the correct pronunciation. We had two three-day passes with which we went to London. And on one of those passes, I left London, went up to Cambridge and toured the universities around there and then back.

James: Did they import girls to the base for entertainment?

Elmer: No.

James: None. You never saw any?

Elmer: None. Never saw one.

James: They did at other bases.

Elmer: Yeah. There probably were USO [United Service Organizations] tours, but none of them ever hit our base when we were there.

James: You didn't see any of those tours at all?

Elmer: No, they didn't see a tour like that.

James: You see the Red Cross a lot?

Elmer: Red Cross was there. Yeah.

James: Salvation Army?

Elmer: Salvation Army I don't remember. I remember a Red Cross—I think it was Red Cross—met us when we landed in Boston. They had quarts of milk on the ward, and donuts and so on. I think every one of the crew drank a whole quart of milk themselves; you couldn't drink any milk overseas. And of course, the donuts. They were offered us there.

And then that night we got American beer. Budweiser. That tasted good.

James: Yeah, in England you had to drink their warm beer.

Elmer: The warm beer. Well, you got used to it eventually. It wasn't too bad.

James: Did you spend much time in the English pubs?

Elmer: No. No, you couldn't get off base.

James: You had your own club, and you really didn't have any—I mean, there was nothing there to do, really?

Elmer: No. The pubs, ya know, didn't—they were so damn short of food and the food was so poor quality that you—when we got through with a three day pass, we were anxious to get back to base and get something to eat.

James: Get something to eat.

Elmer: Yeah.

James: Well, obviously you wouldn't know how much, ya know, the boys were getting involved with any of the girls there in the local town.

Elmer: Some of the—the ground crew had a little more freedom than we did. Uh, and they had girlfriends in town and so on, but my crew—we didn't get that chance.

James: Alright. I've run out of questions to ask you.

Elmer: Well, good enough.

James: But I appreciate you coming in.

Elmer: This has been real—**[Tape ends abruptly]**

[End of Interview]