

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RALPH T. JACOBSEN
United States Army Air Forces, World War II
1996

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Jacobsen, Ralph T., (1921-), Oral History Interview, 1996.

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Ralph Jacobsen, a Stoughton, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a pilot with the 389th Bomb Group, 565th Bomb Squadron in Europe, and his later experiences as a veteran student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Jacobsen comments on joining the Army Air Force Cadets in order to stay in school, flight training in Texas and Oklahoma, and the demographics of his training unit. He describes flight missions, and details his experiences with flak fire. Jacobsen attributes much of his success in missions to luck, and states that luck, not skill, was the way most of the Army Air Corps survived. He comments on targets like oil refineries, the Battle of the Bulge, flying gasoline to Patton's troops, and the psychological difficulties of waiting between missions. Jascobsen mentions recreation activities while stationed in England, plane nose art, and the discharge process. Attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison using the GI Bill, he speaks to the crowding on campus, quonset huts, and interaction between professors and veterans. He touches upon joining the VFW and American Legion, and the personal importance of attending his unit's reunions.

Biographical Sketch

Jacobsen (b. May 11, 1921) served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, he was the pilot with the 389th Bomb Group, 565th Bomb Squadron of the 2nd Air Divison-8th Air Force. After the War he attended the University of Wisconsin and eventually settled in Stoughton.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2002.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay, today's date is November 12, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Ralph Jacobsen, of Stoughton, Wisconsin, a veteran of the Army Air Forces in World War II. Good morning and thanks for coming in.

Jacobsen: You are more than welcome.

Mark: I appreciate it. On a crisp, cool morning. Why don't we start out by having you tell me where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?

Jacobsen: Okay. I was born in Stoughton, Wisconsin, on May 11, 1921, at 209 Seventh Street. Which is now 415. I was raised in Stoughton, except for about three or four years when I was in Madison. At age of two to six.

Mark: Of Norwegian heritage, I might ask.

Jacobsen: Oh, solid Norwegian. Both parents. Both my parents had been previously married. My dad was a bricklayer in Moline. They came up to work on the new highway trailer building in Stoughton. My mother was widowed with three sons. At that time, the youngest was a year and a half old, and three and a half, and five and a half years. And she ran a boarding house. And, of course, my dad was looking for a good place to eat. And he found more than that. And they got married a year later, and I came along. So, I graduated from Stoughton High School in the class of 1940. And my dad, being a brick layer, thought I ought to learn the trade, so my brother was a bricklayer also. So I was indentured to T. S. Willis, in Janesville, and I worked a year and a half there, in Moline, in the Rock Island area. In Illinois. And I started at the University in the fall of 1941. Which I'd go to school in the winters and then go back as an apprentice in the summer, which I was very lucky that they would allow that. And in 1942, I think it was May something, there was a brochure running around the University: join the Army Air Force Cadets; stay in school until the president needs you. So I was always interested in flying, having built a lot of model airplanes when I was a kid, and that sort of thing. So I joined up. And stayed in school. I got another semester and then, in March, March 23, of 1943, the president wanted us.

Mark: Had you finished? You hadn't finished school by this time?

Jacobsen: Oh, no. I was only a sophomore year. And along that line, I figured I was going to go in, I didn't crack a book for the first six weeks, and I had a straight F. And I started getting a little excited. Up at the door pounding, "Let's get out of here." Well, anyhow, we went in, Gene Hanson and I, he was an attorney in Madison. His parents took us down, and we ended up in Decatur, Illinois, on a train to San

Antonio Classification Center. That was a rough ride, about three days on old cars. You had to pull the seats down and sleep on the floor in the whole thing.

Mark: Now, was that Kelly Air Field?

Jacobsen: No, it's near Kelly. But it is the San Antonio Classification Center, at that point. Where we took tests, you know. Coordination, mental tests, physicals, the whole thing. I think after about two weeks, we went across the road, as they call it, to San Antonio Pre-Flight. There we went in as underclassmen. And at that time they had kind of like West Point. Four inches of chair; yes, sir; no, sir; double-time; everything.

Mark: Did you have any difficulty adjusting to this sort of military life style? Some people do, some people don't. It's definitely not like civilian life.

Jacobsen: It certainly wasn't. I remember getting off the bus and standing there, like a bunch of kooks. A truck load of guys went by, this army truck, and "You'll be sorry!" And that sort of thing. But I think we adjusted. It was a little tough getting up every morning, hitting reveille with shower clogs and an overcoat. And we had KP, and that sort of thing, also. But over at Pre-Flight, across the road, we studied, I think, a lot of engines and navigation, and weather and that sort of thing. And code, which I had a little problem with. And we had to pass ten words a minute receiving. I could send like crazy but that wasn't what they wanted. And the strange thing, when we got to be upper class, after about four, or four and a half weeks, they got a new class in. These guys were veterans in, up in Alaska, the Aleutian Islands. Had a couple of captains. We had been in there maybe four, five, six weeks at the most. We were supposed to rack them back, you know, like the upper-classmen. So the class system fell apart at that point. And after completing there we were transferred to Fort Worth, Texas, Hicks Field, for Primary, where we flew PT-19s. And got about sixty hours, I guess. And from there we went to Enid, Oklahoma, where we flew the Vultee Vibrator, and the BT-15. Primary was just to learn how to fly, get the thing going, staying in the air, doing spins, and stuff. Well, when we got to the bigger airplane, we got more cross-country and formation flying, and instruments, and that sort of thing. It was another step up. And we got through there, I was transferred to Eltis, Oklahoma, where we flew twin engines. I decided I wanted to go into multi-engines. You had a choice. Either go single engine or multi-engines.

Mark: Yea. Why did you choose them?

Jacobsen: I don't know. Really, I don't know. It must have been something. I think we wanted to go back to Fort Worth because we had a girl friend down there. But, better leave that out of the tape. But, anyhow, flew AT-9s, Curtiss AT-9s, and the Cessna AT-17, which they called the Bamboo Bomber. And that sort of thing. Where we had more instrument flying. Got our instrument rating, cross-country,

and you know, more precision stuff. Then I got my commission and wings, class of '44. Graduated the 7th of January, 1944.

Mark: Through all these different sort of training programs, I would imagine there were some candidates who were washed out.

Jacobsen: Yea.

Mark: -- when I was in the service, I imagine it was the same thing. Was there a way to tell who was going to wash out? How many actually did? Maybe you could just describe sort of about that aspect of flight training school.

Jacobsen: Okay. I think Primary is where we lost most of them. The guys would get air sick. And they would go to Wichita Falls, for ground duty only. But a lot of them ended up as gunners and some other, engineers, flight engineers, and that sort of thing. But, I know, my first, I had never been in an airplane before. I loved airplanes. My first ride was twenty minutes and I filled the bag. And, the instructor says, "Go over to the dispensary." Well, I never went over to the dispensary. So, I finally worked my way out of that and I got a new instructor, an old, lanky Texan. He talked me through everything, just as easy as could be. And I think he probably gets the credit for me staying in. And, of course, as you got into it a little better, it, I don't remember anybody washing out in Basic or Advanced, unless they screwed up somehow or another, by buzzing, or some other thing.

Mark: So, of those who survived, is there sort of a profile that you can give me? Some college, college-educated? Certain regions of the country? Who ended up becoming bomber pilots, from your own experience and observation?

Jacobsen: That is a good question. I know we had a real cross-section of the country. They were from all over. And even from, one guy by the name of Hughes, right out of the hills in Tennessee, and that sort of thing. And, I don't know. Well, we had George Gobel was in that class.

Mark: Oh, is that right?

Jacobsen: And Bobby Burns, the orchestra leader. You probably haven't heard of him.

Mark: That one I don't know, but George Gobel I do.

Jacobsen: So they had a lot of guys from Washington, D. C. They were a bunch of characters. They had one guy was a hypnotist, name of Kaplan. And the year and a half I had at the University helped me a lot getting through a lot of this stuff.

Mark: Classroom type of thing? Study habits? And that sort of thing.

Jacobsen: Yea. It was not only flying, but we had classes about half the day, too, where we'd study and did some navigation, and weather, and a lot of aircraft identification. And that sort of thing. Ships, and that sort of thing. So, it was all-around training but as far as a profile, I never thought about it. I couldn't really go back. We must have had a pretty good cross-section.

Mark: So, once you got your wings and you are ready to go, how long was it until you actually got overseas?

Jacobsen: Well, from when we got the wings, then I went to Fort Worth, Terrent Field, Carswell, they call it now. They had just deactivated. We went into transition to B-24s. And we had about a hundred and twenty hours. I think sixty of that was in the left seat. So we got our transfers from there, went out, got a crew at Pueblo, Colorado. And that is where we trained as a crew. Go ahead.

Mark: I was going to ask, how you would describe the crew in terms of who they were, personalities, I mean, this is the crew that you flew with overseas.

Jacobsen: Yea. Well, just as an example, here, on a flight line, for the first time, our radio operator, who was a was a washed-out cadet. Washed out in basic because he was screwing around a little bit. He asked the co-pilot, "How many hours you got in this bird?" You know. And P. G. Morrow, the co-pilot, says, "I've never been in one before." So we'd never been over-trained. But, as far as the crew, they have gone to. My flight engineer was a mechanic before. He had gone through, he was right from Lexington, Tennessee. Sharp as a tack. Tennessean. And then the radio operator was the son of a Methodist minister, from Georgia. My one—two of them were from Pennsylvania, the nose gunner was from Pennsylvania, and was kind of an artist. And the tail gunner was, where in the heck was he from? He was from Michigan. After the war, he was selling tape decks and this sort of thing. I think he was probably in something like that before the war. And one of the waist gunners got his high school diploma going overseas. So, he was only eighteen, but a big butterball, but a real fine guy. Paul Carrall. And the other one was, he was an electrician, from Kalamazoo, Michigan. And that was the crew. We used to have a ball turret in it but they took those out over in England because we flew formation, they had enough fire direction, and that sort of thing. But, anyhow, about in July, we left, we were transferred to Lincoln, Nebraska, where we picked up a brand new B-24. Which they loaded up and we flew, close to three hours going up and checking your compass, and that sort of thing. And we took off at midnight for, we were supposed to go to Bangor, Maine, but we ended up, we got diverted up near Buffalo. We had to go to Grenier Field, in Manchester, New Hampshire. Stayed over night, a night or so, and we left from there to Goose Bay, Labrador. And stayed there a couple of nights. We had a bad magneto in one of the engines, so they had to repair that. So we took off there at midnight and went flew to Iceland. We used to kid about that because we had bomb bay tanks, and the flight engineer pumped an extra couple of hundred gallons of gas into that,

which threw the airplane right -- way out of trim. And it wouldn't cruise at a hundred and sixty-five. It was dropping down to, but until that burned up. I didn't find that out for forty-three years, incidentally. At our first reunion. Then we had a, from Iceland we flew in and hit Sternaway and come down the Irish Sea, over the Isle of Man, and landed in Wales, where we dropped the airplane off. Then we went over to North Island, across from Belfast, for a couple of weeks, for orientation. And the gunners had more training, and we got all the scoop on the U. K., that sort of thing.

Mark: Yea, I was going to ask you, in terms of orientation into the combat zone, for you, I mean, what were they telling you? Were they telling you what to expect over Germany? What to expect in England?

Jacobsen: No, not at that time. I can't remember that sort of thing. It was more to get used to the Englishmen, and that sort of thing. And then we were loaded into a B-17 and flown to, we were assigned to the 389th Bomb Group.

Mark: Which was stationed where?

Jacobsen: About seven miles out of Norwich, up in East Anglia. It is about, a little field called Hethal H-E-T-H-A-L, I guess. Then we were assigned to the 565th Bomb Squadron, which is the 2d Air Division of the 8th Air Force. And after about I think it was about three weeks of training, there, where we flew formations and practiced, and again getting more used to what was going on. We flew our first mission, I think it was on, somewhere near the 25th of August, 1944.

Mark: Now, I was going to have you describe your first mission, and what is going through your head. What, perhaps, some of the veterans are telling you. About what to expect. Set the scene for the first mission. Infantrymen talk about the first time, I would imagine it was the same for you

Jacobsen: Well, on our first mission, we flew co-pilot with an experienced crew. I flew co-pilot, and we hit a place, Wismer, way up in northern Germany. And it wasn't too far from this, where they were doing the rocket development. And it was kind of a milk run, because the first flak I saw was about a mile off, and, you know, I thought, this isn't going to be anything. You know. And it was getting used to how do we form over. We had a bunch stationed on our base, which was a radio beacon. And they would fly twelve minute circles around that, and you'd find the group, or squadron you were supposed to be in, and then you'd cut the circle short, and get into position that way. Instead of trying to chase each other. And that sort of thing. Of course, there were, the gunners would check their guns out over the Channel, and that sort of thing.

Mark: So, was it as cold as the movies make it out to be up there?

Jacobsen: I think it ran forty, forty-five degrees below zero. We normally flew, I think it would average out about twenty-two thousand, five hundred, something on that order. It varied. I think the highest we flew was twenty-five thousand. And that is where the -17s had us. They could fly higher. We could fly faster and carry a bigger load, but we didn't have, we couldn't fly that altitude because flying a -24 is like an old truck. There is no boost on it. Everything is all muscle. And trim tab. So the second mission, the third mission, I think our second mission was to Belgium. The third mission was no big problem, we could see a little more flak and that sort of thing. And we didn't have fighters. And we were over there late enough where we had fighter cover. It was like the first guys that went in, they really took it. And I remember the fourth mission, to Mainz, Germany. We were flying on the bomb run and I noticed the squadron, or the group, ahead of us, all of a sudden, bang! Everything broke loose. They were shooting barrage flanks. In other words, to protect where they were going to be, and shoot everything. And I kind of got out of my mind because the radio operator was on the cat-walk, he says, "The doors had frozen shut." That was one of the bad things about a -24. If you took off in wet weather, the doors went up alongside the airplane and they would freeze in their tracks. So he is out there kicking the doors trying to get them open and the bombardier turned his head and I couldn't talk to him. I was going to tell him be careful, and all of a sudden, we got there and hell all broke loose, flak, and you would see a red ball and go through it. Stuff going through the airplane like .22's off a flat rock. The bombs went away. The radio operator just pulled his leg back and the bombs brushed his leg as they went out. And we looked out, and number four was spewing oil all over heck. They had, what had happened, a piece of flak had hit the prop hub and gone into the engine, and there were covers for the valve rods. Rocker arms. Well, it had ruptured one of those and was spewing oil. But, other than that, the shock of that sort of thing, and that was kind of our initiation.

Mark: Was that the roughest mission you flew? If you can even categorize or quantify that?

Jacobsen: No, we were very lucky. We never got, our squadron never got bounced by fighters. But we had an awful lot of flak. You know, they were still damned good at that. And we had some, well, you talk about luck. We had a direct hit. It went right through the wing. And of course, it exploded up above us. And where it didn't hurt anything, it went through the back of the wheel, you think of the microseconds, and luck, luck, luck. Like this one I saw on television. They were shooting from probably four miles, and we were doing maybe two hundred and fifty miles an hour. And how just a fraction of a microsecond that could have hit the wheel and exploded, and we would have gone down, of course. One way or another. Rough missions, well, this if fifty years or better. And it all kind of melds in, but they were all a little scary, because, you know, you had to go through this stuff. And the fighters were around us. We were down in, we flew on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day, on the Bulge. And the 27th and 28th. So we flew four

out of five days. We got an engine shot out down there one day, and, but the airplane was so good, it could stay with three engines. You could stay right with your...

Mark: I think we have discussed German air defenses. It was the flak that was the problem for you, in your experience.

Jacobsen: Well, they had fighters, and they were getting the jets. Because I saw these -163's, that little jet, it had about five, six minutes of fuel. He went past a -51 one day like he was standing still. Then they made the -262, I think, the twin engine. I never saw one of those. But they were around. But, I'd like to give a little incident, talking about luck. My navigator, we flew Christmas Eve, and my navigator was, we were stood down for Christmas Day. And it was my radio operator, Billy Rose, birthday on Christmas. So they went out and got schnoekered, on the base. The navigator was due to fly with another crew by the name of Price. Well, he checked the roster again, and then we found we were scheduled to fly. So he got off that crew. And we flew Christmas Day. And we were on the bomb run. They were bombing every little cross road down in that area. First two squadrons, which we were in, they bombed a town just a little short. And the third squadron caught the error, and just went a minute further, and then they turned around and they were out there all by themselves. And the Germans came in and broadsided them, and took three airplanes out of there. One of them was the crew that my navigator was supposed to fly. Incidentally, Price was one of the crews. His mother contacted me after I got back, and wanted to find out what when on. So I corresponded with her about five, six years. Apparently, she passed away at that point. A real fine lady, down in Texas. So, you can see, everything was luck, luck, luck.

Mark: In terms of your target, there was the Bulge. That was more of a tactical operation.

Jacobsen: Yea. There is a list of them. You can see on there what the list of the towns, they were just small towns, little railroad junctions.

Mark: Yes, I was going to ask, in terms of the strategic campaign, what your targets mostly were. Factories, railroad junctions?

Jacobsen: Yea, oil refineries, like we went to Magdeburg, which is a pretty good size. And they had an oil refinery there, just north and east of there. And we were instructed to bomb visual. Well, we went over there four times, and they couldn't find it visually, so they had radar, and they would bomb the marshaling yards, which were right in the middle of Magdeburg. So you can imagine four times that many airplanes, they must have just devastated the city. The navigator went there one more time, when they finally got the target. A lot of it was in the railroad yards. We would, in fact, we had six one thousand pounders one day, that were delayed fuses, anywhere from twenty-four hours to a week. And we were flying, climbing, forming at about thirteen thousand feet. We had to climb through the clouds and I noticed with I pulled the nose up a little bit, the air speed wouldn't increase, and

when I dropped the nose, it dropped off just the opposite. And we found out that the heater had shorted out and we were freezing up, so we, I finally aborted the mission, and called the lead, and said I was not going to go back, so we dropped six one thousand pounders out in the Channel, because we couldn't bring them back. A quarter of a turn, they would go off. So, then, of course, I got into a little trouble with the colonel, because, you know, they took the airplane up shortly after and everything was okay. They didn't go high enough for it to freeze. And the next day, another crew took it out and they ran into the same problem, so.

Mark: Yea, I was going to ask about the accuracy about the bombings, and what you could tell. There was the famous Norden bombsight. I would imagine you had some type of bomb damage assessment briefings, that sort of thing? Did you?

Jacobsen: Yea, they always took pictures of the strikes.

Mark: Did you get a handle on how well you did?

Jacobsen: Well, I know we missed the target by twenty miles one day. We were, they were bombing by radar and picked up the wrong city. But, I don't know, a bull's-eye is supposed to be about two hundred yards diameter, or radius.

Mark: And you are bombing from how, you are cruising about twenty thousand and when you are bombing, you are going lower, I presume.

Jacobsen: No. No. We always bombed from that altitude. Twenty-two, twenty-three, whatever it was.

Mark: From that altitude, at that time, two hundred yards is pretty good.

Jacobsen: Yea. The method, not a lot of everything, the way it was set up, air speed, temperature, this sort of thing. And altitude, I guess. We had guns that the gunners had, at that point, .50 calibers, they were on mounts that, when you shoot them, they wouldn't even vibrate, and they also had a sight that was a little red dot. And if they did that without slamming it, they could put that dot on whoever they were shooting at, and it would lead them, and everything else for them. They had come a long way since the old ring sights.

Mark: So, looking at this list here, it seems that you flew about every other day. There are gaps in there. Somedays you were flying every day.

Jacobsen: Well, there was twenty-five missions between August 25, '44, to February 24.

Mark: So, you were in the air about every other day, every three days.

Jacobsen: Well, it varied. You know, when you are flying, it didn't bother you so much, because you were so busy. But when you stood down for a few days, then you got

thinking about this. Just like something gnawing at you all the time. And, even down to the rest home, we'd go down to London on a three day pass, or something like that. Hell, you wouldn't stop at anything. Get schnoekered, whatever it was. Whatever you wanted to do. Anything. But you know the day you came back to the squadron, you were going to fly, or the next day. So you had to take that into consideration.

Mark: I was leading to what sort of things you were doing when you weren't flying. When you were back at the base, when you got a couple passes.

Jacobsen: Well, sometimes we would get on our bike and go down to the little town, Wingham. It was a bike ride. And sometimes at night, sometimes, we'd go down to a local pub, or something like that. And, of course, they had an officers' club. Then, of course, there was training going on, too. The Link, and that sort of thing. I am trying to remember what we did do.

Mark: Well, there was the well worn phrase that the GI's were "over-paid, over-sexed, and over here." I am interested in what sort of relations you may have had with the British.

Jacobsen: Well, I can remember one day I was down in London. And I met an Englishman who had been in Cleveland for a few years. So he kind of took my under his arm and showed me around the place. So I didn't have any problem there. And I went into a little restaurant that was opened to the street, and ordered a sandwich. And I was eating half of it, and apparently there was a shortage. The waitress comes over and says, "You don't need that," and takes the other half back. You know, most of the stuff, down there, we'd go to the Regent Palace, down at Piccadilly Circus, and to a lot of sight-seeing. When we were down there. And we had an awful lot of Brussels sprouts, I remember that. There was not much meat. I remember going to the Tower of London, and Westminster Abbey, and Westminster Cathedral, and, of course, St. Paul's, around like that.

Mark: Was that kind of exciting for a twenty-three year old kid from Stoughton.

Jacobsen: Yea. I guess so. Well, I, you know, I have been trying to think, I can't even remember who I went down there with. Part of the crew, or some other guy going to London. And I can't even remember where I slept. And this sort of thing, you know. They had a Red Cross down in Piccadilly. I went through the directory and found Walter Nederbled, who was my printing teacher in high school, and the football coach, Ray Myrich. They were in there at Red Cross volunteers. So that was kind of interesting. But as far as, well, you'd kind of go down there and kind of just R & R a little bit, and have a few drinks, and eat, that sort of thing.

Mark: I look at this list of targets here, and I see Old 77. That was the name of your...

- Jacobsen: At, we were crew 77, in Pueblo. So we just started calling ourselves Old 77.
- Mark: And one of the things you see—
- Jacobsen: That is Red Grange, isn't it?
- Mark: Is it? I don't know.
- Jacobsen: Yea. I think 77 was.
- Mark: Before my day.
- Jacobsen: We had been going by Old 77 ever since.
- Mark: One of the things you see in documentaries and movies and that sort of thing is nose art, and that sort of thing. Did you do such a thing?
- Jacobsen: No, we, I--
- Mark: How common was that sort of thing?
- Jacobsen: Oh, quite a bit. There was quite a few of them over there. One of them that is quite famous is Delectable Doris, which is a beautiful picture of a nude woman sitting in a martini glass. You know. And I keep talking about that. And there was Lucky Lady Beth we flew, I think it was a Bar-H. We flew Bar-J, most of the time, because every airplane had a little different characteristic, and Bar-J, J for Jacobsen. We flew that most of the time. And I thought we were going to finish our missions in there, but we were on our way to Berlin one day with a full load, and before we left England, they scrubbed the mission. And we came back and landed with a full load of bombs, and a good load of gas. Put the brakes on. I thought they were a little mushy. I thought, boy, we were heavy. I didn't report it. And the next day, the airplane went out again, and the guy came in to land, put the brakes on. There weren't any brakes. He went off the end of the runway, and wiped the nose off. So Bar-J spent the rest of the time we were there in the hangar getting the nose repaired. But, there was one over there, well, there was one had written on it, "I've had it." We were hauling gas over to Patton when he was hung up around Metz, and we went and picked up an airplane at another base. And they had dropped tanks from the fighters hooked in the bomb bay filled full of gas, 87 octane. And even the outboard tanks. And we flew over around San Quentin. Part of that is in that tape. And when we came back, apparently the King crew was flying this airplane. I had it. They came back in minimum weather. And at first they cleared them to a runway. And the first time there was a truck coming down, and the second time they went around, there was an airplane crossing it, and so he had to go around a third time, and he was getting mad. And landed long. There was two strips right off the end of the runway. And he headed for the drainage

ditch, and wiped the airplane out. And they had picked up a live .88 cannon shell, about yea long, wrapped up in a GI blanket, bounding around in the cat-walk. That particular airplane had flak glass on, which is thick glass on the sides and around the front, so I told our crew chief, "Boy, it would be nice to have that." And the next day we had it on our airplane. As far as armament on the airplane, we had this armor plate folded right on the outside, probably three-eighths of an inch thick, quarter-inch. And the flak glass, and we sat in seats, they first came out like mummy cases. You know, they actually came around you. You were sitting kind of sitting in. They were so heavy, you couldn't move them. So they burned off the part that, you know, like the mummy case and just had it around our back. And even that was heavy. And they would say, "Well, wear a flak jacket." And you got all that stuff on you, you couldn't move. You know. Couldn't fly the airplane, so you'd just throw everything away, except for a little triangular deal in a vital spot.

Mark: I didn't count this, but I assume this was twenty-five missions.

Jacobsen: Thirty-five.

Mark: Thirty-five missions?

Jacobsen: See, they originally started out with thirty-five. And I think the Memphis Belle was the first bomber that completed twenty-five missions. Statistically, it was impossible to complete twenty-five at that point.

Mark: I was going to ask how unusual was it to survive thirty-five missions? In your bomb group?

Jacobsen: Well, it was getting better. You know, then they raised it to thirty missions, and when we got fighter cover, and then later in the war, German good fighter pilots were getting decimated. You know. And they had no choice. They flew until either they were killed or the war was over. It wasn't like us, where we would get thirty-five, or whatever missions, and go home. Same with fighter pilots. So they were getting pretty green, toward the end there. Of course, it was all taken into consideration, the fact that we had fighter cover and that sort of thing. Less airplanes attacking us.

Mark: Yea. And I presume that you knew that your magic number was going to be thirty-five.

Jacobsen: Yea. Yea.

Mark: Did that take a toll on you? You know, they studied the Viet Nam War, and they had one year tour, and they didn't think the soldiers were motivated, and I wonder if this sort of similar thing here.

- Jacobsen: You start to play knots. I started doing that driving back and forth to Madison working at Ray-O-Vac almost thirty years. You start to play knots. And that is what we did there. I think that is why I only took those mission poop sheets. I never kept. We did get one Purple Heart on the crew because he got hit in the head by a diary. They said they didn't want us to. But it would have been kind of fun to have it. After our, you know, fifty-one years or so, all these missions kind of meld together piece of flak. There again, another inch, one way or another, it would have killed him, you know.
- Mark: So you flew thirty-five?
- Jacobsen: Yes.
- Mark: So, what happens then? When the war is not over. It is only February, '45.
- Jacobsen: Yea, it was the end of March. Well, February. We left in March. They flew us to Shorely, England. Scotland, I guess. Over near, what is the big port? I can't even think of it now. But, anyhow, we were there for a week or so, till they shipped us to southern England, where we got to Southampton, we got on a ship and came back. And we were at Fort Kilmer when we got the word that President Roosevelt died. So we had a twenty-one day leave again. And then I was shipped out to Santa Anna, California, for re-assignment. We'd have flown ATC - - Air Transport Command - - for six months delivering airplanes around the States. Which would have been kind of fun, you know. And then we'd have been shipped overseas to the Pacific. Or, who knows? It might have been back over to the Berlin Airlift. But I think we were scheduled for the C-54, which is a DC-6, DC-4 at that time.
- Mark: So, it was probably, you were probably not going to be going back into combat.
- Jacobsen: No. No, I don't think so. But as I was interviewing for this re-assignment, the guy said, "Do you want to get out?" You know, I says, "I don't know."
- Mark: This was before the Japanese surrendered?
- Jacobsen: Yea. Yea, it was probably in May, sometime, of '45. And, well, in fact, when I was home on my leave, the day I got on the train to go to Santa Anna, that was V-E Day. May 8. Anyhow, I got to thinking, I better get out of here when I can and go back to school. So that is what I did. I was probably on one of the first trainloads into Fort Snelling, Minnesota, for discharge. I think it was June, was the final. I got some leave left over before the end of June, before my final discharge.
- Mark: And so you are out of the service. Free and clear. As an officer, there was no reserve obligation?

- Jacobsen: No, we were Army of the United States. That is not the discharge. I can't remember what it was. That profile, that is later, I think.
- Mark: But you weren't going back in the service?
- Jacobsen: No.
- Mark: You never did go back in the service once you were home.
- Jacobsen: In fact, we were there so early, they didn't, you were asking about the Reserves, and they didn't have that set up yet. Which I am kind of thankful. My navigator signed up for the Reserves and ended up back over in England in B-50's. And a friend of mine got caught in that, too. But, anyhow, after I got through, I told my dad that I better get a job. And he said, "Aw, take the summer off." So I was one of the first guys home, and I was out at the lake, at the bars, about every night, for all these guys coming back. You know. It was a real great summer. But then I started school again in the Fall of '45.
- Mark: And what did you go there to study?
- Jacobsen: Well, it was mechanical engineering, at the University of Wisconsin. And, of course, I was tired of chasing around, so I got married on September 1, 1946. And I graduated from the University on June, of '48.
- Mark: Did you use the GI Bill to complete your education?
- Jacobsen: Yes. Yes. Yes. That was a life saver.
- Mark: Did it cover your expenses?
- Jacobsen: Pretty much. They paid tuition and, what is it, \$90 a month, or something. And I was living at home.
- Mark: That helps.
- Jacobsen: Yea. Commuting. But eventually, I spent a couple of years staying in Madison, and my grade point went up a full grade point, because, you know, you get home and try to study, and there were so many other things to do, so you were distracted.
- Mark: So, you were on campus before the war, and then after the war. I would imagine they, it was a very different place.
- Jacobsen: Well, there was about twelve thousand there before the war and after the war,

there were eighteen thousand. They built all the Quonset huts, and that. There was a lot of GI's and a lot of guys in the Air Corps there, too. Course, we all wore our old greens, our army uniforms, or pants and stuff. Just to wear them out because we didn't have much more.

Mark: In terms of the classrooms, and the authority of the professors, before the war, of course, you were a twenty-year-old kind going to college. And after the war, you're an adult. And I am wondering if the professors were able to have as much authority in the classrooms with these tougher students, or wasn't that an issue?

Jacobsen: I think their problem was they had this, what was it, the V-12, the Navy? Course, after the war, these guys didn't give a damn, they wanted to get out, and they were just going to school. And I can remember one prof out at, I can't remember his name, one of the old timers.

Mark: Engineering?

Jacobsen: Yea. Giving us hell because, back when they went to school, and this sort of thing, and this and that, and a voice out of the back, "Well, what is your excuse, Prof?" And this professor tore up the damned, and the guy took off, and he didn't catch him. He was a Navy guy. And it helped, too, because grade-wise, because they always graded on a curve. And, of course, these guys didn't give a damn, so the curve was slanted a little bit. That helped me get through, too. I got married. Incidentally, we lived upstairs with my folks for about eight and a half years. While I was going to school, and that sort of thing. And our living room was the room I was born in. So we hadn't moved very much. Finally, we thought it was time to go, so, being a bricklayer, I thought, well, I would build a house. That was in '53. I am still working on the damned thing.

Mark: I want to move on to housing. Well, let's talk about housing because I forgot what I was going to bring up. Was housing a problem?

Jacobsen: Not for me. I was either staying home or I had a good friend of mine. We had a, well, the bachelor apartments on North Henry, he had an apartment there. So there were three of us in there.

Mark: Were there a lot of people cramming in onto the campus? A lot of recently discharged people needing housing, that sort of thing?

Jacobsen: Yea, I said, it went up to eighteen thousand from twelve.

Mark: There was sort of a housing crunch after the war. I am wondering--

Jacobsen: Yea. Some friends, guys that were in Engineering, I know that they lived up at Baraboo Powder Plant. They had the housing there. And there was one of them

would drive a bus in. So they bussed all the way down, what, about forty miles?

Mark: That's a long way.

Jacobsen: Pretty good roads, too. That was some of them. I can't remember any other housing but the veterans would come in with their families and that sort of thing. Of course, they had families up there. That was probably one reason they did that. And I suppose there were some other places around, too. Like I say, we commuted. That was some of the greater times, too, because a guy had a little old '34 Ford, and there would be six of us in there.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

All from Stoughton. And driving to school. He worked at McArdle, taking care of the rats. He was kind of a half-cousin of mine. I don't know, it was fifty cents a day, or something like that. It was pretty reasonable.

Mark: And when it came time to build your house, I am wondering if you used any GI loans, either state or federal, to do it.

Jacobsen: Ah, it was funny. I had \$900 and the lot. You know. I bought two lots for \$900, I guess it was. 132 x 133.

Mark: With your own money?

Jacobsen: Yea. And I went to the bank, Old Cash Neihagen. I said, "I'd like to get a loan." I said, "I am going to build it myself." He says, "No, we won't give you a loan." He said, "If you have somebody built it, we would probably do it." So my folks, I went to the other bank in town, the Dowell Bank. Old Robie, that goes back to like Christmas Carol, the old guy sitting over the books. But real fine one. And I went there and they said, yea. I needed about \$4,000 to get it up where I could get a big loan. So, they gave me the loan but I found out that they took it out of my folks' account. As I paid it back, it went into my folks' account. So they weren't too pleased, too, what is the word? Cooperative with a veteran building his own place.

Mark: They didn't tell you that there were federal or state programs for veterans. I mean, were you aware of this?

Jacobsen: Not at that point. I wasn't aware of it, I don't think. Well, anyhow, I got it up and all the block laid, and the roof on. And, of course, it didn't have windows. And the wife's uncle was Lehrdahl, Al Lehrdahl, and he was in, what is this Savings and Loan out there on Union, Shanks Corners. He came up, I was working down in the cab, as an engineer and kind of a manager. "You need a loan?" I said, "Sure." "Well," he says, "tell us how much you need and we'll be up there in an

hour.” And I took a loan out for ten. I should have gone a little more. Five percent on that, because they had just raised it from four and a half to five. So I had the money, and I started really going at it. It took me two years before we could move in.

Mark: So, in terms of finding employment after the war, a lot of vets on the job market. Getting the job at Ray-O-Vac, was that the first job you had?

Jacobsen: No, no. It was kind of strange. I had this bricklayer trade. I came back from the service and the union said, you know, I think I only had about two and a half years out of a four year apprenticeship. And the union said, we can't expect this guy to go back as an apprentice, so they gave me my journeyman's card. I worked for Findorf, and Vogel here in town. And I was down, oh, yea, T. S. Willis I worked with them. The last job I worked on was Parker Pen. You know the white building. I worked on McArde Institute and where the old University Hospital is. And up on the square, Anchor Savings and Loan, the old place used to be. A lot of jobs that way. So, when I interviewed for a job, and I had a job lined up with Illinois Bell Telephone, right down in the Loop. And by that time, we had a daughter. We had this, we weren't going to have any kids until I got through and got a job. Well, our daughter was six months old. Anyhow, the wife decided, she had lived in Chicago. We weren't going to raise out kids down there, so I had to give it up. I was looking that over, oh, about six months ago, I found the old letter. Some ridiculous figure, you know. Less than a hundred dollars a week, or something like that. Living down there. Well, anyhow, then I went back to bricklaying. I started working for Findorf and around. Worked on the Scahling (??) home in Stoughton and the First Lutheran Church, laying the stone. So, well, after a while, I got thinking, geez, I got four and a half years of school in here. I better take a look at that. So, I got a job down at Highway Trailer, in Edgerton. In the engineering department, which I basically did drafting and that sort of thing. It was kind of silly. But at that time they were hiring and firing. They went just like a sine curve. They'd be high. And then they started laying off again. So my friend from Stoughton, we were going to get laid off, so I went in and said, "Well, you're laying him off tomorrow. I think I am going to go, anyhow. So, why don't you lay me off and let him stay?" So the next day, we both walked. Then, of course, I went back to laying brick for a while. And then I got an offer from the Cab & Body in Stoughton. Building custom truck bodies. And I worked there for four and a half years, and I think three of that I was the superintendent, I ran the shop. The other manager, the superintendent, got mad at the management and quit. And that was interesting. I was designing bodies, refrigeration. And you get right in on the sales of it, and follow it right through. And sometimes after delivering. And everything was different. I think the last year I was there we built forty-seven bodies for Gardner Bakery, you know. No, Oscar Mayer, I should say. Anywhere from Madison to Atlanta, Georgia, and out east. Well, I couldn't see any future there. And then I started looking around and I got a lead on Ray-O-Vac. And went in and interviewed there, and ended up in the product design department.

- Mark: I don't get the impression that military service hindered your economic hopes for a life at all.
- Jacobsen: No, I think, well, I had put away savings bonds. Of course, I was going to school, and being married, that kind of slowed things down a little bit, you know. Not really, that was some of the best years of our lives because all our friends were out of the service, and everybody was trying to establish themselves, you know. So, that friendship goes on to today. You know, we were really fortunate in that way.
- Mark: Well, that sort of leads me into the last area of questioning I had, and that involves veterans organizations and reunions, and that sort of thing. I know you have been to some reunions, but I want to start this discussion by talking about the immediate post-war years. When you first got out of service, you were in school and working, and that sort of thing. Did you join any veterans organizations?
- Jacobsen: I was going with a girl that's father was very up in the VFW.
- Mark: That was a World War I dad?
- Jacobsen: Yea, I guess so. And he was, he had me in the VFW before I came back from overseas. But, it was \$15 a year, at that point. That was quite a bit. And my brother-in-law got to be commander of the American Legion. So we all went to the American Legion. We were having a great time there and then when he left, I kind of fell out of it, again. Then, about ten years ago, I got a call, a friend of mine said, "Well, why don't you join the VFW again?" So, I says, "Fine." Well, I got a few bucks, I'll join. So I been in that, but not active.
- Mark: Now, in the post-war years, it sounds to me like you joined for social obligations and social reasons rather than any sort of political or fraternal?
- Jacobsen: I never got involved in that sort of thing. Now, reunions, our crews. We lost track. I know where two of the fellows were. Basically, we had ten, originally, and they took our bombardier, so we were nine. Two of them were in Michigan, and all of a sudden, one night, I got a call from my flight engineer, who had taken it upon himself to get the old addresses and call. He got my address. So that way we, and I found my navigator through the Veterans Administration. He still had his GI insurance. So we finally got all the, and then, of course, it steam-rolled because everybody knew where at least one or the other were. So, for about the last, I think this was the eighth or ninth. Well, see, it took us forty-three years to get together. And we got together down in Nashville. Franklin, right outside of Nashville. And from then, we had them in Stoughton, we were in Kalamazoo, we were in Fort Worth, Texas, Pueblo, a couple of times. Tucson. We've been all over the country. Next year we are going out to near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, because one of the crew members is out there. But, we get together for about three or four

days. And it is just enough to renew acquaintances. Fight the war over again. Like you will find on that tape. There is an awful lot of crap in there not to do with the actual combat missions. About the first five, ten minutes, the navigator is talking about shaving under his arm when he was a kid, because he didn't know any better. Thought everybody did it. And there is some on there about when we hauled gas to Patton, we wanted to go into town. 24's were lined up like tank trucks, you know. My co-pilot was sick. He had really, the flu. So, I stayed with him, and told the other guys to ahead into town. And the other crews said, we'll drive the trucks, or whatever you want to call it. My navigator and the radio operator and flight engineer went into town. They hooked a ride into town. And they had a good time. I had a carton of cigarettes I paid fifty cents at Goose Bay for when we went over, Old Golds. Wrapped in paraffin. So they took that. They were worth about twenty bucks a pack, you know. So they came back with champagne and everything else. And I heard them down under the flight deck when they got back. Like a bunch of little kids, giggling and laughing. I found them in the back end there, curled up with engine covers. I missed out and I didn't find out for like forty-three years that they didn't want me to go into town because they wanted to be free of the rank, you know. But there is some, I got to edit that tape before I send it to my flight engineer, because his wife wouldn't appreciate it.

Mark: That is about all the questions that I had. Anything you'd like to add? Anything you think we skipped over?

Jacobsen: Well, you were talking about. I asked, well, you were talking about how it felt about flying, the fears and stuff like that.

Mark: Oh, that reminds me of, oh, go ahead.

Jacobsen: But, there was fear, but I think it was controlled fear. I remember asking the crew about that out in Reno, and it was anticipation, I guess, the unknown. And I got to talking to Amble, that is the fellow I was talking about in the submarine. He just found prostate cancer, about ten days ago, or so. And I said, you know, we were talking about this fear thing. And I said, "You know, you are going through just about what we were going through in combat, because you don't know what is going on until you find out and get involved in it." It's gnawing at you, you know, that uncertainty.

Mark: And, after the war, did that sort of gnawing uncertainty have any effect?

Jacobsen: I think it took me over a year to kind of settle down and get back into things. It is a whole different life style, you know. I can remember once sleeping on the porch down there at the bachelors' apartment. On the top bunk. And the roommate came in and turned the light on. And I apparently had been flying in my dreams, or something, and that big light was just like the airplane blew up. And, boy, I jumped out of bed. So, it's a reaction like that. And I am sure a lot of guys in

combat get that same thing. I am so glad I was in the Air Force. I feel so sorry for those guys who were like in the Bulge, and in that cold, and all that. You can't get away from it. We'd be over there and be the center of attention for a few hours, and then we would come back and have warm meals plus a good bunk to sleep in.

Mark: So, for about a year after the war, you think it affected you?

Jacobsen: Yea, I think it takes a while to get--

Mark: Nothing long term, or debilitating?

Jacobsen: No.

Mark: Which does happen.

Jacobsen: Oh, yea. No, I didn't get any of that sort of thing. And luckily enough, too, you know. Like these guys over in the East there, where they get the gas. Although we were briefed on mustard gas. We had the bombs for mustard gas. Because they thought old Adolph might be trying that. Desperate. But, other than that, I don't remember any ill effects. In fact, I think probably everyone who has gone through this sort of thing has kind of grown up a little, you know.

Mark: Now, that is about it. Anything else you 'd like to--

Jacobsen: No. I appreciate this chance. I been talking about it. Like you say, if there is ever a copy of that tape. I'll send you up a couple of blanks.

Mark: Oh, sure. No problem. Yes the original is always going to be on file so that's not a problem. Well, thanks for coming in.

Jacobsen: Oh, a pleasure.

[End of Interview.]