

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Erwin Koppel  
United States Army Air Force,  
World War II  
2003

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**Koppel, Erwin**, (1923- ), Oral History Interview, 2003

User copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **ABSTRACT**

The Milwaukee, Wis. native discusses his World War II service with 445<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group of the Air Corps; he gives detailed accounts of many of his 35 flying missions. He talks about enlisting in order to choose his service, training in Texas, being married while on leave, living near military bases with his wife, and the age requirement of the Air Corps. Koppel describes the men in his unit, officer and enlisted relations, instructions on what to do if shot down, and life in England. He comments on learning formation flying, painting an airplane with the names of his crew's wives and girlfriends, and his first mission. He describes the first night mission of the 445<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group to Kassel (Germany) when he was on pass in London and upon return they discovered two crews had been killed and their barrack was empty. Koppel comments on the acceptance of death as part of daily life in the military, flying uniforms, the protection offered by flak suits, and flying a dangerous mission on Christmas. Wounded by a piece of flak, he comments on in-plane medical care, hospital care, and arguing with the flight surgeon until he was cleared to fly again. Koppel touches upon Air Corps food, keeping close count of the number of missions he flew, returning to the United States aboard a ship that was also carrying German prisoners of war, and attending the University of Wisconsin shortly after discharge.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Koppel ((1923- ) served with the 445<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in England. He flew 35 missions before being discharge and returning to Wisconsin. He eventually settled in Florida.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2003.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2003

## Interview Transcript

- John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and today is October 3, 2003. And this is an oral history interview with Erwin Koppel. Erwin currently lives in--
- Koppel: Boynton Beach, Florida.
- John: Boynton Beach, Florida. He is up from Florida, here in Madison. We are at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And good morning, Erwin. And thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview.
- Koppel: Good morning.
- John: Why don't we start--
- Koppel: Well, I'd like to start by giving a little bit of background of actually how I, I was nineteen years old at the University of Wisconsin, a sophomore.
- John: Erwin, let me ask. When and where were you born?
- Koppel: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- John: When?
- Koppel: And grew up in Milwaukee, went to school, graduated from Riverside High School.
- John: When were you born?
- Koppel: 1923. I am eighty years old.
- John: Hey, great. You don't look eighty years old. Go ahead.
- Koppel: And this was 1942, when I was a second year, I was a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, and the war was, we were well into the World War II. And we were being drafted, and so forth. So I decided to enlist so that I could pick the service that I wanted to get into. And I enlisted in the Army Air Force. At that time, it was part of the Army. And at that time, we were put into the Reserves, but shortly thereafter, because we were students, I was called into active duty on February 25, 1943. Which happens to be my birthday.
- John: Happy birthday!
- Koppel: Happy birthday. And I was twenty years that day. And I remember saying goodbye to my parents, and I got on a train, and went to, ended up in Miami. This is

February, Wisconsin, and a few days later I was in Miami, in the sunshine.

John: A Wisconsin boy.

Koppel: And there they put us through basic training. They taught us how to drill. The idea being we want to learn how to obey orders, work as a unit. And after basic training, they showed us a lot of films, and we felt like we were soldiers.

John: Let me break in here with a question I ask. Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Koppel: Yes!

John: Where were you and what were you doing on Pearl Harbor Day?

Koppel: We all remembered Pearl Harbor Day.

John: Oh, yea, I remember it too.

Koppel: At that time, I had a girl friend, who later became my wife. And we were listening to the Green Bay Packer game, on the radio. Television did not exist yet. And we'll always remember that. They said, "Japanese planes are bombing Pearl Harbor." And we said, "Where is Pearl Harbor?" And then we went back to school. And that was 1941. By 1942, I had enlisted.

John: Okay, let me go back to your story. You were then in Miami?

Koppel: Yes. And then we started, I became a cadet in the Air Force. And we went through phases of training. And we were initially sent to Kutztown, Pennsylvania, to separate the men that had more mechanical and engineering training from the rest.

John: Do you have any idea how to spell Kutztown?

Koppel: K-u-t-z. T-o-w-n.

John: Yea.

Koppel: And the idea there, they had lowered their requirements so that men from high school could get in, but they found they had to give them more training. So those that needed more training in mathematics and other mechanical-electrical, more technical ends of it, they kept for about three months. But when they got to guys like me who were already in college, they found we had enough training, so I only ended up there for one month. But that month was very important because they gave us flying training. In small planes, Piper Cubs.

John: In Pennsylvania?

Koppel: Right. Took us out to the air field and we had ten hours, approximately ten hours. We flew the planes and we did everything but solo. And that gave me the feel of take-off and landings, and flying patterns, and going into spins and coming through. And it made an impact on me. I said, "I don't know if I want to be a pilot." After this. From there, we went to San Antonio for all our final physicals, and mental training, and I passed everything. And I came to the point where they said, "You are qualified to be anything in an aircrew. You have to make the choice." And at that time, my feeling, at that time, was I did not want to be a pilot. And I chose bombardier. I was then sent to bombardier school. And this took, oh, no, first we went to gunnery school. Everyone had to learn how to be a gunner. We went to Laredo, Texas. And we learned how machine guns could be taken apart, put together in the dark, and so forth. And when you are flying. And we practiced flying at targets, riding in planes with target plane next to us. Then we went to bombardier school.

John: Where was that?

Koppel: That was at Big Springs.

John: In Texas?

Koppel: In Texas. I think, all my training was in Texas.

John: Okay.

Koppel: Yea. And, because there you had the good weather all the year around.

John: Oh, sure.

Koppel: And there we learned the Norden bombsight, which I noticed you have one downstairs on exhibition. At that time it was still secret, and we had to carry it out to the ship. We had to wear a gun, and all that. And we learned how to drop bombs around the area until we qualified. And from there we graduated and became officers. We got our silver wings. And at that point, this young lady that I had been watching, listening to the Packer game and hearing about Pearl Harbor, we had gotten very close, and we decided to get married. I got a leave, at that time, and went back to Milwaukee, and got married.

John: Yea. The picture is in here (Koppel's book).

Koppel: Right. And she then came back with me, you know, we traveled as a pair. And we went to Lincoln, Nebraska, and formed our crew. We all assembled there. And we got two pilots, a bombardier - that was me - a navigator, and six enlisted men.

John: And you were flying the B-?

Koppel: We were assigned to B-24's, the Liberator.

John: Okay.

Koppel: Yea. We were then shipped to El Paso, Texas, for four months of training in the B-24's. We learned how to do formation flying in a group, we learned how to do bombing, where we worked as a unit, how to fly together. We flew low, we worked the machine guns. Practiced with those. But, primarily, we were really working to learn to be a unit. A crew on an Air Force bomber has to work as a unit. From that respect, it's different, you might say, from the infantry or the Navy, who worked in larger groups. You are an integral, single group, and everyone depended on everyone else. And that was important. By now, a year had passed. We were married, this was, I went in, in '43. I was married in March, '44. I am now in the crew, a flying officer. In March, '44, and we were being shipped overseas. Now, the worst fighting, I've read some books on this, since my son got me interested in it. And I read the Ambrose book, that he covered the crew of a B-24. Senator Bill McGovern, the pilot.

John: Steve was a good friend.

Koppel: And the Robinson book he got for me. He was in the 445th (Erwin's outfit.) And he wrote the book on life in the 445th. He was ahead of me. He went over there in '43. He was an enlisted man, he was a gunner. He writes very well. And he, but I am actually going ahead here.

John: That's okay.

Koppel: But, let's see. My wife and I were living together in El Paso. We got out of training and she went with me to, we got our leave and we came back to, I think it was Topeka, Kansas, where we said goodbye. And by this time, we had formed groups. The average age of the flyers was around twenty, twenty-one. And this was something people can't comprehend. We were all very young. The maximum age we were permitted was twenty-six. To fly.

John: Oh, I didn't know that. Okay.

Koppel: If you were twenty-seven, you couldn't fly anymore in the Air Force. They wanted young men in top physical condition. We had constant calisthenics. We were the cream of the crop, you might say. Mentally and physically. And we, as I say, we were twenty, twenty-one years old. Some of the gunners were a little older, but they still all were in their twenties. And we believed in discipline. We now had been a year in training. We respected officers. We followed commands. And this was very important. Because, when you were sent into combat, you had to go into combat, because that is what you were trained for. And that is the only way it

works. And officers give commands, you follow them. That is the overall picture. In an aircrew, you each have your mission, your job. The first pilot is still the commander and if an overall decision has to be made, he makes it. But everywhere else, for example, in the bomb run, the bombardier takes over. He is flying the airplane through the Norden bombsight. And he is in charge. And when fighters are attacking, every gunner had to do his job or else we are not going to make it. And everyone is using their eyes to see what is going on. Do navigation, do pilotage. The navigator is the most important; if we don't get there, the mission isn't worth it.

John: Yea. Sure.

Koppel: So those are the things that we all had in mind. We got over to, we then, as I say, I went over in 1944, in September.

John: Could you tell me a little bit, or tell the story about the guys in your crew? What they were like? What you thought of them?

Koppel: My pilot, I was very fortunate. His name was Fritz Mueller, and he had had pilot training. These are the officers and enlisted men (showing pictures in the book.)

John: Oh, okay.

Koppel: The co-pilot was also very good. We had two good pilots. Interestingly enough, to jump ahead, after the war, when we came back, he stayed in, the co-pilot. And became a flight instructor. And I tell the story about him, because he was, he became a captain, automatically, if you reenlist. And he was instructing a colonel from Milwaukee. He was down in Texas, giving him flying instructions. And the plane crashed. And by this time, I was back in the University of Wisconsin, after the war. And I am reading this article about this colonel from Milwaukee was killed in a plane crash. A tremendous article. And then it mentioned the pilot was Captain Craigs.

John: Oh, wow.

Koppel: That was my pilot. And I wrote a letter to his wife, because it gave the airfield, to say how sorry I was to hear about all of this. But it just shows you. By that time, we had actually become accustomed to life and death, which I am moving ahead in the story. So that you didn't take it quite as serious. You got used to it, accustomed to it is the world. It still was a serious matter. But those are things that happened, and I'll mention that later, the matter of how luck played a part of this whole business of being in combat, and getting back, and through it. The navigator, after I got overseas and when I was still in training, I also took navigation training. The powers that be were seeing something, that the bombardier could also be the navigator. And I had both training. I now had

gunnery training, bombardier training, navigation training. So when I went overseas, and I took a little more navigation training in England, where we were stationed. And they found that they could remove the navigator from the crew, and the bombardier could take it over. And they didn't need a bombardier in every ship, so sometimes the bombardier functioned as a gunner. And I flew thirty-five missions of which about half were as the navigator and the other half I was either a nose turret gunner where I could also act as bombardier, because of the complete training. But I will get into that later, when we get into the missions.

John: Just, thirty-five missions--

Koppel: One more thing. The enlisted, I have mentioned the officers. The enlisted men came from various backgrounds. The officers were more or less my type of background. They came from a more sophisticated training, you might say, and they had more of a background. That is what they found out. The enlisted men, they would take a minimum of training. They could train them in four to six months, and some of them came from the farm, some of them came from high school. It didn't make that much difference. And in the Army, there was a tremendous demarcation between enlisted men and officers. We did not live together. We did not see each other. There was an officer's club, an enlisted men's club. We did not mix, because when officers gave a command, everyone had to follow it. And if the senior officer gave a command, the junior officer followed it. So we only were together when we flew. That one picture that we took, that was the only time we were ever together.

John: Yea? Okay, all right.

Koppel: Socially.

John: You mentioned thirty-five missions. Over what span of time?

Koppel: That went from September, 1944, till March, 1945.

John: Six months?

Koppel: No. Was it more?

John: September, '44, to March of '45?

Koppel: That might be. That is right, because--

John: That is as awful lot of missions in a short period of time.

Koppel: That's right. I always think it is nine months, because we came over in August, and we stayed until May, so those times I wasn't flying. Yea. It was nine months,



period, but the actual combat was, yea, six months.

John: That is a lot of flying in a short period of time.

Koppel: We came over, they were sending, initially the crews were flying the planes over. But as the war increased, they were sending over more crews than they had ships for, and I actually went over in a ship. It took two or three weeks to go over, in a large convoy. And mostly boring. Going over by ship. Coming back was a little more interesting. But going over, it was just, we did a lot of reading. Once in a while they dropped depth bombs, but we weren't hit by any German submarines. We had, we got over to England and we had a month of training. A couple of weeks, I think, we went over to Belfast, Ireland. And then the world started to change. We were suddenly being lectured by combat officers returning, and veterans of combat. And we heard things we never heard before. And we were issued .45 automatics, that we wore. We were told what would happen if we were shot down. They said sometimes the Germans would kill us on the spot if we had a gun. And we had the option to return the gun. I returned it. I figured I wasn't going to be able to shoot my way out of Germany.

John: That's true.

Koppel: They told us interrogation, if we were shot down, and they told us a little thing about shooting of flak. We couldn't comprehend that until we were actually being shot at. But then it got very serious. We realized what we were getting into. At that time we then were assigned to the bomb group, and four of the crews were assigned to the 445th Bomb Group. The 700th Squadron. And these were men that we had pretty much been in training with. We knew them quite well. And we when to Tibenham, was the air base. T-i-b-e-n-h-a-m. Tibenham. About two hours north of London. And there were other airfields. They were building airfields all over, of course. The British were building before we got there, and then we were building fields. As you were flying over, you would see airfields all over. And we were assigned to a Nissen hut, which was a metal hut, looks like a half of a pipe.

John: Yea. Oh, yea. I know them well.

Koppel: When I came back after the war, they used them, this campus was so crowded at the University, were they still there when you went?

John: No. They were down, but I lived in them when I was in the service.

Koppel: And, I think there were four sets, the officers lived in one hut, the enlisted men, there must have been another hut in the enlisted men's section. But we had, I think it was four groups in the hut. Four, no, that doesn't sound right. There were three. Three groups, twelve men. Twelve men in a hut. And we came marching in, and by the time we got there, the field was pretty developed. As I said, I read this

book written by the man who was there a year ahead of me, and they were still building it when he got there. And they put in fifty gallon drums, they made them into stoves in the center of the huts. And it was cold. It was cold. That is all I remember of the whole nine months I was in England, and I was always freezing. I couldn't get warm. We slept under eight blankets, in our long underwear. And that is the way it was. And, however, we kept thinking of the infantry, the men over there in France, and this was just after D-Day, and they ploughing their way through. And we felt sorry for them, fighting the Germans. And it was interesting, because later on I was on leave, I went to London. I went to the officer's club and I was talking to an infantryman, a lieutenant, who was wearing four Purple Hearts.

John: Ooh! Wow. Oh, wow.

Koppel: He said, every time he got shot up, they sent him back to London for re-hab. And he said, "You know, we looked up at you guys flying overhead, and we pitied you guys. You were duck soup for the Germans. You were being shot out of the skies, and you were dead." He said, "We felt so sorry for you guys." I said, "We felt sorry for you!" It just, combat is combat. It is terrible. All the way. So, we took about a month's training, learning how to fly around England, and again, the most important thing is formation flying. The closer you get your wings together, you have more fire power. There was six men, about ten machine guns on the plane, and you get six, twelve planes together, they put up tremendous fire power when the, by the time I got there, the Germans were reluctant to attack us. They would be there, and they would look for moments, which I will get into later, to attack. But if we could keep flying the formations close, we were much safer than we were a year earlier. And we practiced that, and finally, at the end of September, we were ready for our first mission. Interesting thing about the planes, the planes flew most every day, if they could fly. The set up was that the crews would fly every third day. Missions were very exhausting. You would get up at three in the morning, and you would be take-off at six o'clock. From three to six, you would have briefing, and preparing your plane, and the bombs would be loaded, of course, when we got there. By six o'clock, you are, as it gets light, you assembling your formations and that can take half an hour, or so. And then you are flying over to Germany, or France, or wherever you are bombing. And by the time you get back, it is anywhere from eight to ten hours. And the tremendous pressure. You are always tense. You are scared, you are frightened. You are being shot at. And you are exhausted. You get off that plane and you go to debriefing, and some of the men couldn't hardly talk. And you couldn't even eat. You would go and fall in bed. So, theoretically, you were supposed to fly every third day. It didn't, although the planes did not belong to you. You would be assigned a plane, but there were three crews assigned to that plane.

John: I never heard that.

Koppel: So some thought, initially, this is your plane. We'll paint our logo on it, and we'll

put the bombs on it, and that is the way it started. But as the different, and I will jump ahead, for the moment and say, we started with our plane. We were assigned our plane. And we put names, each one was given an engine to put his wife's name or his girl friend's name on it. And so forth. As time went on, one day our plane went out with another crew and was shot down. That plane did not come back. We never marked up another plane. Our plane was gone. We were always flying some plane. And that is the way it worked out. You didn't have your own plane. Our first mission, when I was giving this talk last year, I picked out certain missions, and that as a new rookie crew, the older veterans, the men who, old men, they were probably twenty-two, twenty-three years old. They had been there six months. They took the new ones. So, us kids, we got the old planes to fly. The old beat up planes. What we found in flying missions in World War II, the three things that bothered us the most were, and I am not giving them in the proper order, because at different times different things bothered us. The maintenance and the condition of the airplane. I could fail at any time, the parts of it. The weather was terrible in winter in Europe. That could ruin a mission. The maintenance could ruin a mission. And the third thing was the enemy. He was shooting at us, but we had those three things to work with constantly.

**[End of Side A of Tape 1.]**

On our first mission, we were flying, September 22, 1944, we assembled over the clouds. We had a great deal of difficulty finding our group. Of course, there were planes assembling all over the skies and the way you found them, they would shoot a certain flare. We had our own tail markings. And there was a ship that was painted and checkered, and would be our lead ship. We would form on that ship, and then it would go back. And at that mission, I was flying as the nose turret gunner and bombardier. And as we were flying, as we were passing over Germany, in formation, we noticed the oil pressure dropping in the number two engine. And we finally lost that engine. That was very common. We had four engine planes and it was very common to lose an engine. Because of maintenance.

John: You could fly on three?

Koppel: We could fly on three. The pilot feathered the prop but we did not have enough power to keep up with the formation. We started trailing behind and by the time we got to the bomb run, we cut across, because in bomb runs, you have an I. P., an initial point. And you start that point, and you fly to the target, without deviating. That is when the bombardier takes over. Well, we cut cross diagonally so we could catch up with them. And as we were doing that, we started to have trouble with the number one engine. The plane does not fly well on two engines. And we started to go down. And the pilot finally got the number one engine back.

John: This was your first mission?

Koppel: This was our first mission.

John: Oh, boy.

Koppel: We finally got our number one engine back and by this time we were two thousand feet below the squadron, and we had to worry now, in the bomb run, that they were going to drop the bombs on us. So we had to get out of their way. And we were so busy, we didn't even notice the flak. But suddenly I looked around and there were black bursts all around. And we realized, and the squadron had dropped, and whenever they dropped, the first ship dropped smoke markers. To show where the point of dropping is, for the bombardiers to find. So anyone coming up, all you have to do is get to that smoke marker and drop his bombs. So when we came up to the smoke marker, we dropped our bombs. And now we appreciate the flak that was going off. And it was up ahead. I could see two planes with smoking engines, but no one went down. And then, because we were less powerful, we had to come back by ourselves over Germany. And two P-51's, those were American fighter ships, came up and flew escort for us. And we were able to get back. And when we came back to Germany [England?] the visibility was very bad, as it was on many of our missions. And we had to go down to five hundred feet. And locate it. That was our first mission.

John: That was quite an introduction to bombing missions.

Koppel: The second and third missions entitled us to get a pass to London. Our first leave. And we went as a group, again. The officers stayed together. We went to the officers' in London, the enlisted men went their way. And my co-pilot was married, and I was married. We were the only two married men. And we stuck together. The other men were chasing girls, whatever you did when soldiers went on leave. While we were gone--

John: You say you got a pass. How long?

Koppel: Three days. Three day pass. While we were gone, the mission that went out. Sometimes we'd send out, we were, at the Tibenham field trying to put forty planes up every day. Sometimes they were down for maintenance or were shot up, we never knew. We would get out between thirty-five and forty planes. And then planes would start out on a mission and they would have engine trouble, and come back. Sometimes it would happen right on take-off, and you would just come back and land. They would have a spare, and a person could get in the spare and take off with a crew. On that day, we ended up, we sent thirty-seven planes over the target. It was socked in. Many missions were socked in, and you had to navigate by radar and drop your bombs by pinpointing the target through the clouds. That was what happened that day. And each group took their turns leading the air force. If we led it one day, then the next day we would be the end. We would send over a thousand planes in a typical bombing mission, sometimes maybe only five

hundred. But sometimes maybe a thousand planes. We would see a long line. They would take about an hour for it to pass. There was a tremendous noise. Sometimes I would be on the ground and I would hear the planes going out, and I would think, "What do they hear over in Germany?" Hearing this tremendous, monstrous noise coming from these engines, and this long line of planes. And then they would get to Germany and proceeded to different targets. But each bomb group had their one individual target. And that happened to be the day that we led the air force. We were given a pass. I might add that I mentioned the matter of being lucky. We were scheduled for this mission but the night before we were told about the mission. But then an order came down from headquarters that they wanted to practice night flying, and one of our planes was given the mission to practice flying night flying. They were thinking of having us bomb at night. We'd bomb days, daytime bombing, and the RAF [Royal Air Force] bombed at night. That is how we did it. But they were thinking of using us. So, this other people, this other crew went out for their night flying, and they had this pass. So they transferred it to us, and they came and said, "You are not flying this mission. You are going to London." And while we were walking around London, we met some girls, we met some guys. We were at Piccadilly Circus, it was full of, and it was the women, they said, "Where are you from, Yank?" We said, "We're with the 445th Bomb Group." "Well, didn't you hear? They were shot down. Lost the whole group." We said, "No." We got on the train and we immediately went back, and what had happened, they had missed the target. Through the radar, they had picked a target twenty miles further, and they were the first flight of a long line of planes. And they went to hit that target. The bend in the river you could see through your radar, and so forth. The rest of the following planes that did hit the target, it happened to be Kassel, Germany, a lot industry there. It is the Ruhr. We went there many missions, in that area. And that is when the Germans, the ME-109's and so forth, and they saw this squadron proceeding on its own while the rest of the line of planes were going back. And the [American] fighters were not around, by that point. The whole incident took place in no more than five or seven minutes. They were hit by two hundred fighters. And only four came back. Three of them crash-landed in France and one got back. All with wounded. We came back to our hut and it was empty. Two crews were gone. And it was difficult for me to talk about it.

John: Sure.

Koppel: One of the crews was in the four that came over with us, and the other crew that was in the barracks, I had just met these men. They had just come in, a week or so. They were a new crew. One of the men was from Wisconsin, and I was beginning to get friendly with him. It was a terrible shock. The next day they flew in new planes and new crews. And life went on. We were able to put up, not the next day but the day after, we were able to put up a mission with ten planes. It took us a week or so to get back to full crews.

John: Sure.

Koppel: And suddenly we became the veterans.

John: Yea. Yea.

Koppel: And you got accustomed, as I say, to knowing somebody, and then they were gone. And you just went ahead, and did your job. Another incident that happened, also when we were starting to fly, and we were rookies. We came back from a mission and the bombardier said that he couldn't take it any more. He said, "I can't fly. I can't handle this any more." And what do you do when a man refuses to follow orders? This was a guy who I knew, and so forth. And it was interesting to me how this was handled. As I mentioned before, we were all young. The Air Force was only, it used young people to handle these things. Our colonel was twenty-seven years old. He was our commanding officer, and he said to this man, "You don't have to fly, if you can't fly. But I am not going to take any action, at this moment." And, as the days passed, like four or five days, his crew took off, got a replacement, and flew the missions and came back. And each day he watched the planes go out. And he came to the colonel and said, "I'll fly." No action. The colonel took no action against him. He went back. There was nothing on his record. I thought it was beautifully handled.

John: Yes. Very well. Because, you could have had somebody--

Koppel: Could have had him arrested, court-martialed, and so forth. And I just mention it. As rookies, we encountered this terrible shock of being in combat and seeing these things happening, and flying wing tip to wing tip, and planes going down. And the worst thing was the flak. In 1944 and 1945, the fighters were not so bad by this time. We flew in the bomb runs, as I mentioned before, once you set the plane up and the bombsight takes over, you cannot deviate. You are flying into the flak. The Germans--

John: What altitude?

Koppel: We were flying, average, twenty-three thousand, twenty-four thousand.

John: On a bomb run?

Koppel: On a bomb run. Yea. The Germans had their bombs, their flak, their shells set to explode at a certain altitude. When you are, these were teams of experts. We were up there, we were working our bombsights, we were vectoring in the altitude, the speed of the plane, the wind, we were all factoring that in. The Germans were down there with their flak guns, their 88's. They were factoring in the same factors for the shells going up.

John: They were the same numbers.

Koppel: If it is visual, and we can see the target, we can hit it. The bombsight is perfect. And conversely, so can the Germans see us. They can see where the shells are exploding. They can see, "Achtung! We're missing them by two thousand feet. Change the--" We hated when it was visual because they could see us. When we saw the cloud cover, it was great. They can't see us. But then we have to bomb by radar.

John: Was the radar any good, back then? Could you bomb by it?

Koppel: It was good. Not as good as visual, but we're dropping, the whole squadron. And we are walking the bombs along, so if we miss by thousands of feet, you might hit the target because you are spreading such a wide range of bombs. Coming down the bomb run, you see the flak ahead, because the Germans are zeroing around the marshaling yards or refineries, or whatever the target is. They've got all their flak guns because they know that is where the planes are coming. And they will watch where the bombs are close, so that the people at the tail end of the bomb run, they are zeroing in close on them. So you are flying into this, and you are seeing the black bursts. Which isn't so bad as when you see the red. When you can see the red in the black bursts, then that is close. And the bomb run could be anywhere from twenty to thirty, forty minutes. It seems like it is hours, when you are flying. Everyone is tense. You can't even talk. The crew, everyone I talked to. I read about it. Because you can't do anything except drive into that, those shells bursting. You have to keep that plane steady. And I'd say, when I talk about that one bombardier that can't take this anymore, you got to appreciate what he went through.

John: Sure.

Koppel: And, conversely, that is why we took a year for training to follow orders and complete your mission. And I might also add that that was a war where we knew we were right. That Hitler was taking over countries and we knew that he was after the world and we knew that he was killing people, and killing civilians, and we did not know the whole Holocaust, how terrible it was. But we knew that he was doing terrible things to millions of people. And we wanted to do these things. We wanted to beat Hitler and beat the German army.

John: Sure.

Koppel: So, that is how our first few missions started out. And then we went further, [mission] number eight. We were bombing an oil refinery, and intelligence informed us that this was the only refinery left working full blast. And we were able to take care of that today. I might mention, everyone seen this in the movies, how they would brief the pilots, and they would come into the briefing room and

there would be, you know, about a hundred men, like coming into this room and all sitting down in their flying suits. I should mention how our flying suits were made up. So we would sit down there, and this was all secret. There was a big map up there that was covered with a cloth and then when everyone was ready, they would pull the cloth down, and you would see the lines coming from London leading to Leipzig or to Berlin, all these. And a hundred men would go, Ohhh!

John: I can imagine.

Koppel: When do we get the milk run? And before we went to the briefing room, as I say, they would wake us up three or four o'clock in the morning, depending on the length of the mission. And you would stagger out and we would go down, and we had a locker down at the briefing room, everybody had a locker. And we would put on, we wore our uniform. Not our jackets, but our pants and shirt with a regular uniform. And over that, by the time I got there, we had an electric flying suit, which was very nicely made, and it looked almost like a uniform. Initially, it looked terrible. It looked like you were wearing a quilt, the first ones. But when I got there, they were better looking and they were full of electric coils. And you plugged in to, you had a plug, wherever your position was on the plane. And the pants and the shirt were plugged together and then you did not wear shoes. You wore flying boots. I always took my shoes along. You were told to. And I put them on a metal grate with a hook, and I clasped them on my belt. And if I ever went out in a parachute, I wanted to be able to walk. Because the flying boots were slippers. And they plugged in, they had electric coils. And we wore silk gloves, in case we had to take off our heated gloves, which, on occasion, if you were trying to un-jam a machine gun, or you had to take off those big heavy gloves, or take care of somebody who was wounded, they plugged in. So you had two sets of gloves. You could not have bare hands, because if you touched anything, the temperature was forty below, it would freeze to your skin. So you always had to cover. We wore oxygen masks. We put them of about fifteen thousand feet, but they were there all the time. And you had a helmet with your ear phones on. What did I say? I said a cap. We had steel helmets that we put on when we flew into Germany. We had them by our sides, regular Army steel helmets we would pull over. The planes were drafty and cold. They were not like the planes we fly in that are heated.

John: They weren't heated at all, were they?

Koppel: There were no heaters.

John: In fact, the gunners were shooting out of open windows.

Koppel: The gunners were open sides, the sides were always open. I flew in the front turret which was very drafty on many of my missions. The wind was coming through at three hundred miles an hour, forty below zero. So we took blankets and we cut



holes in them. And we put a piece of blanket covered our whole head and shoulders. And two holes for eyes, and then we wore goggles. Tinted goggles. So we looked like people from Mars. Oh, over the flying suit we always wore a parka, for additional warmth. And then our parachute straps, and the Mae West, if you went down in the water. That was an inflatable life preserver.

John: Yea. I talked to a B-29 crewman here, and he said they were pressurized and heated.

Koppel: Yes.

John: And he said he talked to guys who flew the B-24's and they flew the B-29's at high altitude in shirt sleeves.

Koppel: In the Pacific.

John: In the Pacific.

Koppel: We flew at forty below. At one point in my training, when I finished my bombardier training, I was sent to Louisiana for additional training, to fly in a B-29 with a group of men. And when we got there, our orders were canceled, because the war was going not good, and they sent us over directly. I didn't mention that. At one time we were going to be B-29 crew members.

John: A little bit warmer, anyway. Okay.

Koppel: So, in the briefing room, we would be in our regular uniforms, and then we would go and get dressed from the briefing room in our full gear, that I mentioned. And as navigators, we would get additional maps because you never knew when you became the navigator, or were coming home alone. Which did happen, to everybody at some time or another. So this was the mission I am mentioning, this was our eighth mission. Going down the bomb run, we shifted into six ships. Usually we were twelve. Ten or twelve in a formation. So we went into six ships because, for some reason, they thought, I can't remember the reason at the moment. But, anyway, as we got up to the target, the flak got intensive and one burst hit about ten yards in front of the ship. We could see the red and the black, and we flew right into the bomb burst and we got, actually, the smoke came right in through the draft, the cracks in the ship. And this was the first time I ever heard the flak. The engine usually made so much noise but I could actually hear the bombs, they had our range perfectly. And this was maybe about a twenty second run, but it seemed like twenty hours until we finally got rid of the bombs and we could turn over. And one piece of flak came through, it just missed the engine cut-off switches which were next to the co-pilot, came right next to the engine switches, and hit the co-pilot in his flak suit. I hadn't mentioned the flak suits?

John: No.

Koppel: After we were completely dressed and got into the plane, we had our flak suits there which were chain metal. They didn't have plastic yet. These were metal. And we wore the flak suit in front, on our chest, and coming down to cover our waist. And later on, when we were flying with a navigator, a piece of flak came through the bottom of the ship and hit him right in the rear end.

John: Oh, wow.

Koppel: Which he was not a happy person. We all thought it was pretty funny. But he was a wounded man. After that, I got an extra flak suit that I stood on, when I flew as a navigator. I never went without two flak suits. But all he got was a bruise where it hit him on the flak suit. And that is the reason I mentioned that particular mission. And when we landed, we would walk around the ship to see what damage we had taken and we found a piece of flak that had come clear through the bomb bay and out the rear bomb bay door. Fortunately, it didn't hit a fuse. When they would hit the bombs, the whole plane would blow up, when the flak would hit the bombs.

John: What was a bomb load, on a B-24?

Koppel: A bomb load was eight thousand pounds. Eight to ten thousand pounds. Most of our bombs were hundred pound bombs. We did several missions, one we hit some, we were doing some bombing to help the infantry down in southern France, on one mission, and we had, there were fortifications and they had asked for our help to knock out on that mountainside. And we flew four two thousand pound bombs, which were huge bombs. And it is very interesting. I don't know if I have that marked, but because we were flying over the troops and releasing over the troops so the bombs would keep falling and pass over the troops into the German lines, it was very important that we knew where the front line was. And what we did on that mission, they would fire friendly flak, at seventeen thousand feet. It was red bursts. At the front line. They were firing up at us at seventeen thousand; we were flying at twenty-three thousand. And that marked the front line. And then they had in instrument that sent a signal straight up, and we had an instrument on our ship that would record that. And then they had some white sheets. They had big arrows on the ground pointing that-a-way the Germans are. But when those two thousand pound bombs all went out at one swell swoop, the plane just jumped like this. The plane weighed sixty thousand pounds. But as the bombs went off, even the hundred pound bombs, as they fell off, the plane would jump. Have we time for other missions?

John: Oh, yes.

**[End of Side B of Tape 1.]**

Koppel: We were talking about the missions. And the problems we would have with old planes and on our second mission, I covered our first mission which you said was quite a mission.

John: Yes.

Koppel: We lost two engines and got one back, and came back alone. The second mission was about thirty-five degrees and very drafty. We had one of the oldest ships in the squadron, and I found myself very uncomfortable up in the nose turret. But, at bombs away, I dropped, I hit the switch and the way we did it at that time, was the lead bombardier would drop and we would drop on him. There was only one guy doing the, using the Norden bombsight. And later on we had a radio control that he could hit, as he dropped he would hit a switch and it would automatically drop ours. But it didn't always drop, and so you would also hit the switch. And we had five hundred pound bombs, but only eight of them went out. And I was up in the turret, and I said to the navigator, "The salvo switch, try to get the other two out." He, they were hung up. Sometimes, you know, everything freezes. If there is moisture, the hooks can freeze and the metal can be a problem. So, finally, we got one bomb, the top bomb released. As it fell, it bounded off the lower one and tore off the bomb bay door as it went out. No, it tore it loose, and it was flapping in the breeze. And we still had one bomb and the pilot went back, and he got a crow bar and wedged it, and he is standing over the bomb bay, and he is releasing that bomb and the second one finally released and took the rest of the door with it. So we came back with all that gone. And right after that, the oil started streaming from number four engine. We had a broken oil line, so we had to feather that, and we came back on three engines. That was our second mission. And, actually, I was telling you about the eighth mission, where the flak hit the co-pilot. And after that we had another mission, as I say, where the navigator was hit. On our sixteenth mission, which was November 30th, we were bombing in support of the ground troops again. And we were trying to hit the marshaling yards, the railroad tracks behind the front, the German troops. And as we were climbing to assemble, we lost one of our engines, and we were soon enough, at the beginning of the mission, we returned to the field and took off in a spare. I said, sometimes that happens, and we just ran from one plane to another. And we got across to the, we were bombing in France to help the troops, and we had additional trouble with the spare ship. And to keep up with the rest of the squadron we had to use extra power. And then our fuel pump went out, when we transferred the gas from one tank to another. So that left us with several hundred gallons of gas that we couldn't pump, so we knew we were going to be running out of gas. But we followed the, we just used extra power and we got to the target. And we dropped our bombs, and coming back, we began to feel the effect of the strain we put on the engines, and now the engines were starting to throw more oil. We saw the gas was lower. And we came back to the field. We fired, if you have a problem, you can fire red flares, you see, and you can break out of the formation. Otherwise, you have to wait your turn to land. We fired our flares. We broke out of

formation, we come in as the first ship, and we landed and we found that we had one tank completely empty and the other had twenty-five gallons left.

John: What was the fuel capacity of a B-24?

Koppel: Well, they gave us enough gas, if you flew the plane properly, for ten hours. And the longest mission was nine and a half hours. Now, remember, your pilots are twenty, twenty-one year old men. Some were boys. And they had a lot of them never flown, of course. And some of them didn't know how to get the right mixtures all the time. And as I mentioned in here (his book), we lost an engine but we still wanted to keep up so we forced the issue, and we were using more gasoline than we should. And we had a mission, I don't know if I am going to talk about it, but we had a mission that, maybe, yes, here it is. This was a mission December 19. We took off in a dense ground fog that ordinarily would have grounded us. However, our support was needed badly on the front lines. Before each take off, and each crew, we were asked to volunteer for this mission. No man refused. And we had to take off on instruments, the fog was that thick. And as we started, we would take one plane up and another, we could not see the ship ahead of us. They were way out of sight. One ship cracked up on take-off. Another hit the top of a tree. And just before our wheels left the ground, we started to slide off the runway, but our pilot had enough flying speed to pull it up into the air. But, as I say, these are the things that were, the weather.

John: Yea.

Koppel: Maintenance, the condition of the ship, as well as the Germans. Assembly went as usual, except we hurried it because the fog had delayed take-off. We flew through a front at twenty-four thousand feet on the way to the target. And that also cut our visibility. And you have a problem when you fly through fog, you fly wing-tip to wing-tip. And everyone said, "Don't change your speed. Fly straight ahead." And you come out of the cloud, they were all over the place. These were twenty year old men flying these big bombers. We dropped our bombs and coming off the target, we lost the number one engine. And again we had to trail. This was our eighteenth mission. And, like I say, the trouble we had, so we were now trailing the formation. However, this was one of those weather days when the planes were leaving contrails, and we were able to see our squadron up ahead, so we could follow them. But then we received a diversion order when we got to England, that the fog had still not lifted at the base and we couldn't land. So we took a course over, we were, the east part of England is where Tibenham was. They said to fly over to the west part of England and as we flew over, we found some other parts of our group and six of us landed at a British base. Now, landing with three engines was not so easy, and the first time my pilot came in, he had trouble, so he took it around again. And, but he made it the second time. The story there is very interesting, if you have the time.

John: Sure. This is your story.

Koppel: This is something that I always tell, a fun story. The next day we called up and they said, "We are still socked in." Now, where we landed was a British abandoned air base.

John: Oh, abandoned?

Koppel: There was nobody there but us six kids, six planes and the rest of us kids. And they had a skeleton crew, and all the had to eat were Brussels sprouts. That is all we saw there, and we said, "We are not going to eat with you guys. Where is the town?" They said, "It's two miles down the road." So we walked down. Now, remember when I told you how we dressed, and so forth. I had shoes. Some of the men, most of the men, were walking in their padded boots, which wore out. It ended up, we were there five days. Every day, we called up, they said we can't come in. Here, that five days, their shoes wore out. I did not mention but in our flying suits we had big pockets and we had escape kits. In these escape kits were maps of France, or depending where we were flying. If we were flying in Germany, they were German maps. They were made of silk. We had food supplement pills. We had a razor and we had money. If we flew over France, we had French money. Germany, we were given German francs, marks. Well, nobody, there was no place to wash, nobody felt like shaving. We just went to town, and we found they had nothing to eat in the town, but they had a tavern, a pub. And so we, each day we got scrubbier looking and dirtier. The fifth day, we said, "The hell with it. We're coming home." "Come on home, on the train." So we went over to a train, and in six ships there would be about sixty men. And we got on the train. And you got to realize, we had on our flying suits and our parkas, and we had a big electric cord hanging out of our suits like a tail. We walked along and the men had worn out their padded electric boots. I had, too. And, of course, the men didn't have hats. And we really didn't look, they recognized us on the train for what we were. But because we had to take a train to London and then from London, it took about an hour and a half or two hours to London, and then from London we had to get another train back to Tibenham, which was another three hours. The next day, the sun came out and all the pilots had to go back and get the planes. I thought that was a fun story.

Now, what happened on the nineteenth mission? The nineteenth mission was a very important mission for me. It was Christmas Day, December 25. We were not, this was the Battle of the Bulge, and we were bombing to help the troops on a continuing basis, to hit the railroads or any kind of transportation behind the German lines. Because the lines were so fluid, the Americans had been pushed around, we could not track the German anti-aircraft guns, their 88's. We knew where all of them were ordinarily and we had them tracked. We had maps, that is what they looked like (showing in book). The red was where the guns were and we could go where there were white spots, to go through. And they called that the

American Highway, the gap. But once the lines were broken up, like the Battle of the Bulge, we had to take evasive action as we hit flak, when we were flying in Germany or France.

John: Okay.

Koppel: So, this particular mission, on Christmas Day, we didn't take off for the holiday, obviously. Or Thanksgiving. The weather was bad, to start with. We were briefed with a strong possibility we might not be able to come back, the weather was so bad. So we took blankets and K-rations. I mentioned our missions were seven to ten hours long. We had a bag that we'd put things in, and we'd put in K-rations. I think it was Spam. I hated it. I ate the cheese, but we had to eat a little something when we were on a mission, so we took extra K-rations and toilet articles, if we were going to get into trouble, like we did before. We took off in fog, assembled, and as we proceeded to the front line of the troops, we saw scattered flak. And we knew that this was mobile flak, because of the way they were shooting. But we could not find a gap to fly through. So we went into evasive action, or else we just had to ride through the flak. And it was all visual, that particular day. And they were exploding very close. The flak was. The squadron was bombing all over the area and we were having trouble positioning ourselves for the run on the railroad junction point. However, we finally made it and we dropped our load square on the target. About two seconds after bombs-away, as we were coming off the target, a burst sent a piece of flak through my turret and hit me on the top of my right shoulder. It felt as if someone had hit me with a hammer. I was just bounced right back, against the rear of the turret. There was no pain, and I found I could move my arm. And at that particular moment, fighters started to attack us. So I stayed in the turret. Our fighter escort had been adequate but we had lost it at the moment, and the Luftwaffe struck. They hit the squadron behind us, and we could see their 20 millimeter guns flashing. Four bombers went down behind us in just a few moments. We fired our emergency fire flares and pretty soon our P-51's came and drove them off. It only took a few minutes but it was very hectic. Time seems to drag when you are in combat. When we came back to the channel and got on the field, my shoulder was aching. I also remember when I was hit, the piece of flak came, in the turret you have a sheet at the back and the machine guns are in there, and then there is an opening where the machine guns stick through, and it came through that opening. A piece of flak, and it hit me right here. And your flak suit is down there, but I just had a strap, and the strap exploded, and it was all kinds of fuzz. And that happened to my co-pilot. He was hit, also. And when it hit him, the pilot, all this cloth exploded from him. And I said, I had a navigator on that flight, and I called him up, and I said, "Are you all right?" And he says, "Yea." And I said, "I think I'm the one that has been hit." And I said, "But I'll stay in here." So, I said, we came back over the channel and I said, "I'm going to get out here, and we'll take a look at it." And I went back to the waist, and there was a waist gunner opened up my shirt. And you have to remember I am wearing a uniform shirt and underwear. We wore long underwear. And so they had to, they

started to rip my shirt, I said, "Wait a minute! That is a uniform shirt. Take it easy!" They were going to rip the whole shirt off. I said, "Just do part of it." And then they ripped off my underwear, and of course, at that time, what we had was sulfa, sulfa melamine. And they poured sulfa in the wounds.

John: Was your skin broken?

Koppel: Oh, yea. And they gave me a shot of morphine. We all carried morphine. And a bone was not hit. It just chewed up the flesh. And then when we came back, we fired the red flares so we could be first to land. And an ambulance met us, and took me over to the hospital. And then the doctor, probably just a mile or so away, the doctor picked out the pieces of my shirt that were embedded in me. And he took an x-ray, and they bandaged it up, and they said, "You are okay. You can go back to your Christmas dinner." And I went back. And I was grounded. And they wouldn't let me fly. The thing was bleeding. I couldn't stop the bleeding. I'd just put a bandage on it and finally I said, "The hell with it," and just took off the bandage until it stopped. And I went to the flight surgeon and I said, "I want to fly." And he okayed it. It shows you the difference between the attitude. I wanted to fly. And the Air Force. I knew my missions. I wanted to complete it and I wanted to fly with my own crew. That was my eighteenth mission. Nineteenth mission. And the twenty-first mission, what was so unusual about that? This was a short mission. It is of interest that, because the take-off was so bad in the weather, we took off, we really didn't know what had happened but when we came back that two planes ran off the runway trying to take off, and one blew up. And just shook the whole base, all the bomb load. And I mention that because, of all the things that could happen, it wasn't always the enemy that did the damage. That killed the soldiers.

John: Sure.

Koppel: We had an incident when we first came over. We went to an assembly group when we first came overseas, when they shipped us from there to Tibenham. We were there about a week or so, and everybody knew all the Air Force was assembling, and they would come, the fighter pilots, the jockey boys, they would like to come and buzz us. And one day we were standing there and these three attack bombers, two-engine airplanes, came down to buzz us. And we were just rookies coming over. They came right down to ground level, and this one plane hit the telephone pole, and just cartwheeled, and crashed, right in front of us. And that was, it was just an experience. These were twenty year old boys, and that was final. But that is, you got accustomed to it. Like I say, in wartime, people are going to get killed one way or another. Oh, the twenty-sixth mission, the weather was so bad that often we had a long lay-off, and we wouldn't fly for a week or sometimes even two weeks. And then sometimes, we'd get all out of line with our scheduling. There was once, I think in seven days, we flew six missions. And that

is impossible. To be so exhausted. To fall into bed, and be woken up at three o'clock in the morning. You never knew. There was no warning when we were going to fly again. We got back to action after a lay-off. This was my second trip as navigator. Once I started flying straight as a navigator, they kept me that way. I never flew in the turret again. And the navigator is standing the whole trip, like the waist gunner, because he is working. He has a small table, he's working the charts, he's doing his navigation. He must always know where we are at any one point. And he has got to factor in all the wind and the altitude and pilotage, if he can. And we had a radar screen. And I was flying as navigator. Right after take-off, I had started with headache and stomach cramps. So my navigation wasn't worth a damn. But we just followed the rest of the ships. And there were a couple of missions where people got sick, but we went ahead anyway. Cramps were, I found, after a while, I couldn't eat any breakfast. I just didn't want to take a chance, and breakfast was so terrible. We had powdered eggs and so forth. That was a great breakfast for the fliers. The guys that weren't flying got even worse. We had fruit cocktail, and that is all I ever ate. Fruit cocktail and coffee. It was visual over Germany, so pilotage was easy. We went through the American Highway, the gap for the flak, and we went through, we went down into the bomb run, we were hitting a plant, a coking plant, whatever that was. Must have been in the Ruhr, and the flak picked us up about a half a minute before and a mile, as we were coming down the bomb run, a malfunction developed in the switches. I could not get the bomb bay doors open. I am now flying as the navigator and bombardier, of course. And the bombs did not go, and I even tried the special radio release. I tried every way I could release but I could not get the bombs out. But, wait a minute, I couldn't get the doors open. That was it. I could hear the flak exploding and suddenly one burst was very close. And this one, a thick piece of flak hit the pilot. There is a piece of, you can see a big plate of armor next to the pilot's seat, and it came just in front of that plate of armor and ran up his arm, above the elbow. And he had, he was out, he had to go to the back of the ship and be bandaged and he was out for several weeks. So the co-pilot, Bill Craigs, took over the ship. And we finally did get the bomb bay doors open. But we were past the bomb run, and we didn't know where we were. We were somewhere in Germany, and we just dropped the bombs. And we flew, apparently we were having trouble because we had to drop out of formation and I had to navigate us back to the field. We came in by ourselves and Craigs made a very good landing, and we were shooting our red flares for the ambulance. But just at that time, a snowstorm, simultaneously as we wheeled in, a snowstorm hit the field and we were blind. And Craigs had to taxi, you know, he had to get off the runway because there were other ships coming in. So I got up in the pilot's seat to look out of the window on that side, and he could look out the window, and we got one of the gunners also to look out the window, and we were watching the wheels, and we'd go left, right, left! And we finally got back, and said, you never know what was going to happen in a mission. That was amazing.

John: That is really amazing.



Koppel: On the thirty-first mission, this was February, 1945, we were, now, this is interesting. On the mission before, we were told that we were going to bomb at ten thousand feet. And this is what they had tried, they had bombed at Ploesti, and these were Liberators. They tried to bomb very low and they lost half of the bombers. And we were very upset. Why are we bombing at ten thousand feet? But apparently, they didn't expect the flak problem there, and we flew over Germany at eighteen thousand feet, and then we came down eight thousand feet, and there was not very much flak at the target. And we dropped, actually, our altimeters, they read seven thousand feet. We got down under the clouds and the elevation there was about three thousand feet. So we were low enough, we could see everything, so our boys started to strafe anything that moved. They were shooting at trains, they were shooting at cars. We opened up with all our guns. And we could see our target, we could see the railroad cars. And our bombs made an excellent pattern. We watched our bombs fall all over. We could see the flashes, the explosions and the smoke coming up. We could see the fires starting on the railroad cars, and we could see from the black smoke that we had destroyed oil cars. I thought that was interesting. And then the next mission was the thirty-first. We flew almost to Leipzig, and we were briefed for another low altitude job, again a marshaling yard. But when we got there the weather was socked in all the way. We couldn't fly, so we would always have an alternate target. So the leader then, we would go hit the alternate target. And coming back over the Channel, we ran into all kinds of weather problems, and we had, what we did when we ran into the weather problems, we would come down, we would go back over the Channel, we'd come down over the water, and then come in one at a time. We had to go all the way down to two hundred feet.

John: Oh, wow. Over the water!

Koppel: And we came down and I said, "This is too low for the big bird." And we had to dodge buildings and radio towers as we came back to the field.

**[End of Side A of Tape 2.]**

John: If we can kind of wrap up here, kind of a bit. Do you remember your last mission? And did you know it was your last mission?

Koppel: Oh, yea. We kept track of our missions very, very carefully. And so did everybody else. And when our pilot was shot up in his arm, and he was out for three weeks, and we said, "Hell, we aren't going to wait for him. We are going to finish our missions." And we volunteered to fly with other crews.

John: Well, you had a certain number?

Koppel: We had thirty-five missions and it didn't matter who we flew with.

John: Okay.

Koppel: And we flew with other crews, and we got ahead of him.

John: I see.

Koppel: And he came back, and he was mad. So he volunteered, and he flew when they were missing a pilot until he caught up. So then on our last mission, we all flew together.

John: Okay. Well, then, your last mission was still a combat mission? The war was still on?

Koppel: My last mission was, I came back and the war was still on. The last mission was March 2. The war was still on, and it was flak was very intense over the target. We had bursts exploding near our ships, and so forth. Coming back, we got a little off course. We had another few guns. But then it was the usual left down. Some very happy boys finished with combat. And we celebrated.

John: So, when you did your thirty-five mission, you were up to rotate, then, to move somewhere else?

Koppel: Now, we finished our missions and they gave us the options. You could volunteer for another tour of duty, another thirty-five missions. And a few people did. Automatic promotion. You became a captain. If you were, you could become a career officer. We had, on that mission that we lost those thirty-seven planes, and we were leading the Air Force, we had colonels, a lieutenant colonel flying the lead plane. And we had a navigator who was a major. These were men that were on their second tour of duty. We had the best, when you lead the Air Force, you have the best, and we lost those men. They volunteered, and then they became special. My pilot said, you could stay and work as a ground officer. He stayed. And I understand he later was promoted to captain, and he did briefings. There were lots of jobs that they wanted combat men to do, if they were willing, and so forth. I chose to go home.

John: I understand.

Koppel: Ninety-eight percent. And but the war was still on. That didn't mean that I wouldn't go into combat again. It just meant that you could go home and get, I don't remember, a two week leave or something. And then report for duty. I came home on a boat. The ship, these were small ships that were in these convoys. And I found out by reading other stories, German prisoners of war were on those when we came back, which shocked us. But they did this even in the Gulf War, they were bringing back prisoners. And I think most of them were officers, and they

had the cabins. We were in hammocks in the hold. But that was so they could keep track of them.

John: Well, I guess so, yea.

Koppel: Down there in the hold, they couldn't keep track of them. But that was a shock to me. And I came home, reunited with my wife. They then sent us back to Miami for reassignment. At that time, they gave us another physical, and so forth. And the B-29's, of course, were bombing in Japan. And my people were still, but they knew that they were going to drop the atomic bomb. And they kind of figured, well, this is what I surmised because I am sitting there, of course, hundreds of other men waiting reassignment for a short term, maybe a couple of weeks. With my wife. We were basking in the Florida sun. And an order came through. Every man who had spent nine months overseas, has eighty points, and has something like six medals, or something, should be discharged immediately. And I had five or six Air Medals, I had a Purple Heart, I had four battle stars and I had whatever. "You are discharged."

John: Oh, wow.

Koppel: So they put us in, I said, "I have to go to Chicago." At that time I was living in Milwaukee. And they put us in a group, the closest they could get us to Chicago.

John: Now, this was what time?

Koppel: This was May. The war is still on, but we didn't know why we were being discharged. We got there, my wife and I got there to Chicago. We got on the train. At Fort Sheridan, they discharged us and they gave us the little Ruptured Duck pin.

John: Yep. I remember that.

Koppel: And we went to Milwaukee. And my folks and her folks are living in their houses. We walk in and my sister, her husband was in the service. And I found a sport jacket. I had my army uniform. I took off my shirt and put on a camel's hair sport jacket. And I walked over to see my mother and my father's sister. But I was wearing the Ruptured Duck in my lapel. And they said, "Why aren't you in uniform?" Because it was proud to be in uniform during the war. And then she saw the little pin, she said, "I know what this is! I read about this in the paper!" And I called up the University of Wisconsin, and I said, "When is the next semester starting?" And they said, "Next week." And I said, "This is May." They said, "We are military now. And we run four quarters." And I said, I was an engineering student, and I said, "Can I start next week?" And they said, "Sure." So I came up to Madison. My wife and I came out here, and I enrolled, and I went to class. War is still on. It was all Navy men. And there were two other Air Force

men, and we became close friends, the three of us. The three of us, we are sitting in class with all Navy, forty Navy guys, B-12 or something they called them. And we went, and then about, people didn't know what the hell we were, of course. And about two months later they dropped the bomb and the war was over. And by this time, we had found a place to live. We were ahead of the flood. And the soldiers disappeared! I mean, the sailors, just disappeared, like magic! And thousands of, thirty thousand guns came running back to Wisconsin, but we were ahead of them. And that was the story.

John: When you got out, did you do anything with vets organizations, the VFW, the Legion, anything like that?

Koppel: No. At one time I considered staying in the Reserves, the Air Force Reserves. But I did not follow through. And I got involved in everything and, as I say, I finished, I finished. I became an engineering graduate, then I went to law school. Became a patent attorney and then I worked at Allis-Chalmers for ten years or so. Then I got an offer in New York. And I joined a law firm in New York but I was in touch with the 445th all this time. They had an organization, and they said they were having their reunion, their annual reunion, in New York. And I was, actually, that was just when I was moving. My wife was still back in Milwaukee, and I was working, and I went over to the reunion. Several hundred 445th people there. I didn't know one of them.

John: Oh, yea?

Koppel: The movement of Air Force people through the 445th and rotation, and so forth, you only knew the people you were with at that moment.

John: Like in your cadre, yea?

Koppel: And at that particular reunion, I came in from the Midwest, and I think what happened, I think the New York, they were all New Yorkers. The people, the guys, they were all New Yorkers, and I wasn't a New Yorker yet. I had just got there. And I imagine when they had a reunion, say in Chicago, it was all the Midwest people would be there. And maybe in California, I figured that out later. But, because of that I, that was the only time I ever got to it. But I kept in touch and they sent me publications and they sent lists of the men. Which I have some papers. This I got after the war. During the war, I had, you may get to the point where you are interested in if I have papers to donate?

John: Yes. Gayle, she would love to have you.

Koppel: I talked to my son about this. I have, see, there are pictures in here. After I gave that speech last year, my son took all these things, and you look through here. There are pictures, we had pictures of bomb strikes, and so forth. And I remember

we'd talk about Captain this, and so forth, and I knew these people. And I saw my crew listed there, and so forth. And who was killed, and who was missing in action. These things came to me over the years. And I have those things. They are very personal to me. I have, interestingly enough, when I was preparing for this talk a year ago — are we being recorded?

John: Yea.

Koppel: I don't know if you want this. That is all right. When I was preparing for this talk, my wife had saved all my letters.

John: Oh, okay.

Koppel: And I had written a letter every day, or two. Because I enjoyed writing, and she had five hundred letters.

John: Oh, wow.

Koppel: That I carried around for fifty years, as I moved from Milwaukee to New York, and around, and I never opened them. And she had written me. And I saved her letters. And so I opened them up last year and I was amazed to find that they were in perfect condition, and they had resealed themselves. I don't remember how we did that, that they opened them. I had to cut them with a letter opener, most of them. Or work it through. But I got them opened. I didn't do her letters. It took me weeks to go through these five hundred letters because I wrote, when I was a cadet, I wrote letters, whenever we were separated.

John: Those would be a treasure.

Koppel: I found most of them to be personal. My son said, "You should donate." I said, "Well, I have to really go through." Because I never wrote to her about the missions. I never told her I was wounded. Or the terrible things that happened. That is not in my letters. I did, as the time went on, I began to get into things. Near the end, I began to talk about the missions, but not, I don't know if it is worth while. What I did do, I set up a code with her. I said, "Every day that I fly a mission, I will send you the *Stars and Stripes*." You know the *Stars and Stripes*, the publication?

John: Sure. Sure.

Koppel: The next day, because the *Stars and Stripes*, if I flew February 2, February 3 the *Stars and Stripes*, you know, four pages, describes the mission. "The Eighth Air Force sent over eight hundred planes and bombed such and such." And I said, "I will send you a *Stars and Stripes* every mission so all you have to do is count the *Stars and Stripes* and you will know where I am. I am thirty-one." I sent her the

thirty-first. I have thirty-five *Stars and Stripes*.

John: Each one carrying a little message.

Koppel: I don't know. That is something I might be willing to donate. But you might have those.

John: Well, also, but you mentioned, you didn't mention your missions in your letters, and that, but you were there and you were going through this. And that, years from now, students will be very interested in maybe not the details, the technical details of the missions, but what is a guy thinking, what is a guy feeling? That type of thing. Because they can read about the missions in the books.

Koppel: Well, before, we were terribly beat up and tired. We did not eat well. That is why we were in such great physical condition. They made sure when they sent us overseas. We did not eat well. We were exhausted from the missions. And at times we flew mission after mission, and we didn't have time. It was difficult to find time to write, or you were too tired. When we got leave, and they, now I know why they gave, once they gave us after so many missions like twenty missions, we got a week's leave. And that time we went down to a resort place in southern England called Tor Key. This is Craig and I, the two married guys. And we, at times, played a little golf, you know, and we went around. And we just cooled it off, chilled out, as they say. And I remember getting on the train back and we were sitting there. In the British trains, you sit facing each other, three across, facing each other. And we were sitting there, and I remember we had linked up with some sailors. And one of them was from Milwaukee. And he went to Shorewood, I went to Riverside High School, he went to Shorewood High School. And we spent an evening together, and they had liquor. We had no liquor. The ships had all kinds, so he brought a bottle of Jack Daniels.

John: Oh, boy.

Koppel: And we were sitting there, and getting drunk. And I am sitting there, and we were talking about it, and the whole, the six people there, they are listening to us. And I was talking about the drinking, and how we all got drunk and collapsed. I woke up the next morning, and the guy opposite us got up to get out, and he handed me a card, and he turned out to be a minister.

John: Oh, boy.

Koppel: He says, "You can see me for salvation," he said, something like that.

John: While we were talking, Erwin, is it Erwin Koppel? Do you have a middle initial you go by?

Koppel: No middle initial. NMI.

John: We won't do the NMI thing. Your address, your mailing address? Current mailing address?

Koppel: 31 Villa Lane, Boynton Beach, Florida. 33436.

John: And phone?

Koppel: 561-736-4527.

John: This is the release I need. Do you want to take a look at it? As a good attorney, I am sure you wouldn't sign anything before you read it.

**[End of Interview.]**