

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
KENNETH C. OSSMANN  
Pilot, Army Air Corps, World War II.

2001

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**Ossmann, Kenneth C.**, (1920-2006). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 54 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 54 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 54 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

**Abstract:**

Kenneth Ossmann, a Janesville, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the Air Corps as a pilot with the 16th Bomb Group, 20th Air Force in the Pacific Theater. Ossmann talks about enlisting after Pearl Harbor was bombed but not being called until August of 1942. He comments on basic training at Kelly Field (Texas), pre-flight school in Stamford (Texas), his first solo flight, and additional flight training at Sherman-Denison (Texas), Altus (Oklahoma), and Randolph Field (Texas). Ossmann touches upon the difference among the types of planes he flew, such as the BT-13, AT-17, AT-9, B-24 bomber, and the B-29 bomber. He talks about being a flight instructor at Altus for six months, going to bombardier school at Big Spring (Texas), and attending B-24 school at Liberal (Kansas). Ossmann touches on bringing his wife to live on his military bases and tells of befriending his landlords in Big Spring. He states his training was excellent and describes some of the emergency simulations pilots had to go through. Assigned to a B-29 group in Geneva (Nebraska), he talks about cross-country flights to Borinquen Field (Puerto Rico). Ossmann recalls discovering his plane's gun turrets had been removed, portrays the duties of the men in his crew, and describes the trip overseas to Northwest Field (Guam), where he was assigned to the 17th Squadron, 16th Bomb Group, 315th Bomb Wing. He describes a typical bombing mission and speaks about emergency landing options, including Iwo Jima, where they were told to guard personal belongings so American troops could not steal them, and Vladivostok. He discusses individual night missions to bomb oil refineries in Japan and describes his last mission after the atomic bombs had been dropped. Ossmann describes life in Guam, including having a nice officers club and bartering for a ham. He touches upon a visit to Manila (Philippines) and his homecoming to Madison (Wisconsin). Ossmann talks about being inactive in the Reserves and being a member of the 315th Bomb Wing Association.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Ossmann (1920-2006) served in the Army Air Force from 1942 to 1946. After an honorable discharge at the rank of 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant, he managed the Yellow Cab Company in Madison (Wisconsin) for thirty years and eventually settled in Verona (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001

Transcribed by Jonathan Young, 2010

Checked and corrected by Channing Welch, 2011

Corrections typed in by Katheryn Mente, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

**Interview Transcript:**

- Jim: Okay. Here we go. Okay, it's February 14<sup>th</sup>, year '01. Talking to Ken Ossmann. Where were you born, Ken?
- Ken: Janesville, Wisconsin.
- Jim: When was that?
- Ken: August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1920.
- Jim: And what were you doing before World War II?
- Ken: I was in school.
- Jim: At the university?
- Ken: At Madison Business College.
- Jim: I see. And you're heading towards a business degree or something—
- Ken: A business degree; accountant's degree. Yeah. I passed. [laughs] I got through school.
- Jim: So you finished the course?
- Ken: I finished the course. I was able to finish, yeah.
- Jim: Sure.
- Ken: And, ah—stop this a minute. I'm tryin' to remember something.
- Jim: Okay, I'm stopping. [Approx. 5 sec. pause in recording] Get this goin' here. There we go. All right. So, and then you were done with that, and then about that time people were talking about a war.
- Ken: Talking about a war.
- Jim: Did you think it was going to involve us?
- Ken: Nope, I didn't at that time or anything. In fact, when the war broke out, when they bombed Hawaii, I was sitting down here alongside the bowling alley waiting to pick up my mother on December 7<sup>th</sup>. She was in bowling. And I'm listening to the radio, and here's all this about Hawaii being bombed and everything like that, and, ah, it kind of shook you. It was really something that part, hey, of the United States was being bombed at

this point in time. And sometime after that I contacted the Air Force and took the exam here in Madison, and they said, "Well, there would be a ninety day wait." And so, in August they contacted me and said, "You are accepted, and you will be in Milwaukee at such and such a time on such and such a day."

Jim: You hadn't had your physical yet?

Ken: Ah, no physical or anything that I ever remembered. So we went down to Milwaukee, and my wife went with me and said, "Goodbye." And we got on a troop train. And a whole bunch of us from the whole area here. And didn't tell us where we were going or anything. As I remember we got down to Kansas City a couple of days later, and they pulled in there. They said, "Okay everybody, we got a YMCA over here where you can take a shower and clean up." Because we'd been on the road a couple of days already, and, ah, they got us down to Texas. And everybody from up here was in Texas, and everybody in Texas was up here and ended up at Kelly Field proper is what they called it.

Jim: How did you happen to end up in the Air Force?

Ken: I applied for the Air Force, and my test was for the Air Force.

Jim: Did you consider the Navy and the Army and—

Ken: Army.

Jim: And you just automatically went to the Air Force?

Ken: I went to the Air Force, automatically went to the Air Force.

Jim: You had an interest in flying?

Ken: Interest in flying. We used to go out to the airport and watch the airplanes and took a ride one time, and I guess that it clicked.

Jim: Did you? That hooked ya?

Ken: That hooked ya, and such.

Jim: I remember going out to the airport and seeing Wiley Post [first pilot to fly solo around the world] come in--

Ken: Yeah?

Jim: In that plane that he had crashed and, you know, got killed.

- Ken: Up in Alaska?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: A number of [unintelligible] came to Madison after that. Royal Airport just South of Madison. Yeah, where the shopping center is now.
- Ken: Used to watch them take off over the telephone pole lines out there and wonder if they were going to make it, those old Tri-Motor I was watching.
- Jim: Those Ford Tri-Motor.
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: Yup. Interesting. Well, anyway, so—now we are getting into some training. Was that complicated or not?
- Ken: It, ah—first of all you went through pre-flight which was schooling, and you're indoctrinated into the Army, so to speak, that you walk straight, you stood straight, and you the learn Air Force song, and you went to pictures, and physicals, and things like this.
- Jim: Physical training, too?
- Ken: Physical training, oh yeah—
- Jim: Had you running?
- Ken: Oh, yeah. They had an obstacle course there at Kelly Field that went down through the ravines and everything. And I am standing alongside the lieutenant, and he says, "How come you aren't running?" I said, "I don't have any shoes". He said, "What do you mean you don't have any shoes?" The sole would come off of my street shoes that I was worn, and they didn't have any shoes that fit me, and I'm only a size eleven, eleven and a half. So—and this thing had rattlesnakes down there, and usually somebody got bit with a rattlesnake down there. But then they would pick out a member of the squadron to be the—oh, say, the lieutenant of the squadron, and all he was was a cadet, and some of 'em came down to be real shit-asses [laughs]. And after we graduated and everything like this then it was our turn to take this—
- Jim: Picking on somebody else—

- Ken: And pick on him, made him walk down through the mud and everything like this. And the second day that we were at Kelly Field they had a hurricane come through there, and so they sent us out onto the flight lines to lay on the wings of the airplanes. And here is these corrugated sheet steel hangers that are just flying through the skyline with pieces of paper. Then we graduated, and we went on top of the hill, but the tents were all blown over from this hurricane. Mud everywhere. I remember it was the first time I heard a Brooklyn I'd say, "Hey you, get out of here with your doity feet, you're going to get my floir all doity". I laughed about that for years. From then we, ah—
- Jim: Now, you're still in pre-flight, right?
- Ken: We're still in pre-flight, with no flying.
- Jim: They haven't designated whether you are going to be a pilot or a bombardier or anything?
- Ken: As yet you were a pilot.
- Jim: That's where you had started out? Assuming you were on the pilot trail.
- Ken: Right, assuming you were on the pilot trail. And then they sent us to pre-flight school in Stamford, Texas.
- Jim: What kind of plane now?
- Ken: With a little PT [training plane]--
- Jim: That was your first experience?
- Ken: A little PT biplane and that was the first experience. And every place that I went that I was in the service—
- Jim: Was that a Stearman?
- Ken: Boy, I don't remember. I don't remember what it was.
- Jim: But bi-wing?
- Ken: Yeah, bi-wing. And, ah—meet your instructor and he'd take you up and do this and do that. I remember my first solo flight. We landed and no indication that I was going to solo or anything like this, and my instructor got out of the plane. He says, "Okay Ken," he says, "it's all yours! Take it around!" So you go down and take off and take one loop around, and I remember going like this [laughs], and the instructor [both laughs] is

going like this. I'm on the down wing. But I landed it all right and everything and got through. You would be tested by another lieutenant and everything, and he said, "Okay," he said "why don't you do a spin-out?" And I started to clear the area, and he said, "If you do that here," he said, "I'll wash you out. Let's get up a little higher." So I went up to—I think it was 3,000 or 4,000 feet or something like this, and I put it in a spin and stall on a spin. And when you get down around to a certain point you slap that stick forward, and I slapped it forward, and we came down like this and pulled out. From the backseat he said, "That was pretty good Ossmann" [laughs] because I really had a beautiful one. Then we went from there to Sherman-Denison, Texas for basic training with a BT-13. That was your first indication of where you change the prop speeds and everything like this. And from--

Jim: Is that harder to fly?

Ken: It was different until you got use to it. It's a heavier airplane and everything like this.

Jim: A single wing?

Ken: A single wing. And then from there I went to Altus, Oklahoma. And every place you went there was a shortage of water because they built these camps in small towns and everything. And I ended up in a twin-engine. We had an AT-17 and an AT-9. The AT-17 was the fabric covered airplane. The AT-9 was metal. And the AT-9 was like the B-24 that I found out. There was no float. When you cut the throttle you went straight down. [laughs] But you flew both of them and graduated--

Jim: What is the difference in flying the single to a double? Was the adjustment tougher?

Ken: The adjustment was something different because, ah, you had two engines to think of, you had more gauges to think of—

Jim: And you try to coordinate the engines.

Ken: You had to coordinate the engines, you had retractable landing gears now, and you had instruments. You flew instruments in the BT-13 but not as much in twin-engine.

Jim: The bar has been raised here.

Ken: Yeah. Graduated from there and the first thing we did when we got our wings and our bars we went—we went into the officers' club to have a drink [laughs].

- Jim: That was your first chance now.
- Ken: [laughs] Yeah, first chance. But I remember Altus, Oklahoma built out in the middle of nowhere. Once a month they would go down through the gutters and clean out the gutters from the silt that floated in. And we'd have dust storms down there. At night we'd put our gasmasks on or put a towel over the top of our head because you couldn't see the end of the barracks for the dust. You'd wake up the next morning, you lift your head off the pillow, and that's where you were, that's where it was clean.
- Jim: Didn't it bother the engines in the airplane?
- Ken: Evidently not, or else the ground crew kept them cleaned out and such.
- Jim: How long did each of these steps that you went—each of those steps went?
- Ken: Three months.
- Jim: Three months?
- Ken: Three months, three months, three months. When I graduated from twin-engine I asked for instructor. And from there I went to Randolph Field, San Antonio, Texas which then was the best of—I am trying to think of what they call it in the Air Force when you go up to and going to that school— Anyway, it was elite. They had permanent buildings and everything like this that you didn't have before. Oh, because you only lived in a Quonset hut or—
- Jim: How big was your class?
- Ken: 43D was, ah— oh, I would say somewhere around 150.
- Jim: 150 guys?
- Ken: Just a—yeah, just a--
- Jim: From all over?
- Ken: From all over. They, ah— well, they came from all over. Most of them were from the North, the Northeast, Northwest, and some of them shipped down into the Southwest training command in the Texas area. And so I went to Randolph Field and went through instructor school down there. And from there I went back to my advanced training school in Altus, Oklahoma and instructed there for—oh, two—



Jim: What—you instructed in basic flying?

Ken: Pardon.

Jim: Are you instructed in basic?

Ken: You are instructed in basic and how to teach a person the ins and outs of flying supposedly, and everything like this. I was there about six months, and then I was shipped down to Big Spring, Texas, the Bombardier School.

Jim: Do you remember now what day or what month of what year this was about?

Ken: I graduated in 43D which would have been in about March, I think it was, or April of 1943. I was there about six months and shipped down to Big Spring, Texas which is another water shortage and a small town. There's more people in the training command than there was in the town. And of course my wife was following me, and each place we'd go she'd have to find a place to live.

Jim: Boy, that was pretty tough on those wires, wasn't it?

Ken: Oh, yeah, and ah—

Jim: They were pretty crude places to live.

Ken: Yes. We were in basic in Denison-Sherman [Texas]. A bunch of girls got together and found this house that they rented. And it got so cold one night it froze the faucets right off the sinks. They remember it startled them. They woke up [laughs] and the faucets were dropping into the sink. So then after Randolph I came back to Altus [Oklahoma] and I was there for a while. Sent down to Big Spring, Texas to fly bombardiers. You had to go up—well it was the first indication of a [unintelligible] 12,000 or 14,000 feet up, flying bombardiers.

Jim: What were you flying exactly?

Ken: AT-11s and AT-7s, I think, were the two bombardier training planes. Twin-engine, ah—metal. And from there I went to Liberal, Kansas to a B-24 school. And when I was there I met my primary training instructor from primary. He'd gone to B-24s, and he was killed there one day while we were there. And the people in Liberal hated the people on the camp, and the permanent people on the camp didn't like the transition people, of all things. Because supposedly we had more money than they to go and

buy groceries and things like this, but I couldn't see it. But, ah—it was not a friendly place.

Jim: Well, that's too bad.

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: That made it more unpleasant for your wife?

Ken: Yes, ah—right.

Jim: You must have been one of the few guys in with wives.

Ken: No, quite a few of us. After you got out of basic training you could come to primary. In fact, my wife—my mother came down into Texas with my wife on an open train with no air conditioning and everything, dust and cinders. [laughs].

Jim: She came down to make sure that your wife was doing it properly?

Ken: Well, she rode down with her. Sure, and everything, and such. But in Big Spring, Texas we rented from a very dear couple who stayed friends of ours for years—

Jim: In their home?

Ken: In their home. We had to wait because they were off marrying their 17-year-old daughter to an Army person somewhere. When they got back, I remember Albert and Janie Smith. They really gave us a going over as to who we were and what we did and everything like this. Got to be very dear friends of them. Visited them later and everything. He passed away, and she remarried, and he passed away, too, and she is now out with her daughter out in Maryland with Alzheimer's and very, very bad. But they were really dear people to us. So I'm—

Jim: That happened at a right time for you, too?

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: Your wife could need a lot of that in turn because she had to spend a lot of time alone, I'm sure.

Ken: Oh yes, very much so. Janie was a sweetheart, and she would mother Sue—or Shirley, I mean, and everything. And we got to be such good friends and such. Her favorite saying was, she says, "Kenny, I'ma whup you—I'ma whup you if you don't behave." [Jim laughs] We use to carry a

case of booze or a cardboard box that had some booze in it. And Albert saw it in my trunk one time, and he said, “You can put it in the garage.” Couldn’t take in the house, but you could put it in the garage. And he put another box on top of it. And one time Janie says, “Kenny, I know what you got in that box in that garage. You just keep it there!” [laughs] But then we went to B-24 in Liberal, Kansas and, ah—

Jim: Now, that was a step up.

Ken: That was a step up.

Jim: Now, we’re in four engines.

Ken: Four engines.

Jim: Tell me about the transition for you. I mean, what was it like?

Ken: Ah—well—B-24s were not a very well liked airplane. There was no float to it. You had to have power all the time.

Jim: Powered in?

Ken: Powered in, powered out, just everything like that. To get in that monster so to speak at this point in time—

Jim: Comparatively, right.

Ken: In comparatively and everything. And I had a good instructor. And of course the people just ahead of you in the other classes kind of fill you as to what they’ll do on you and what they’ll do, and things like this. One of them was a two engine take off. You are going down the runway and all of a sudden two engines cut out, and you got to make the decision either to abort or call for the instructor to help you take off. And the same on landing. You’d be coming in making a right hand turn, and all of a sudden the only engine you got is the right outboard engine. So you call for the instructor to get on the rudders whether you can hold it or not, and then you come in on one engine. And, ah, flying with two engines.

Jim: That’s what they want you to be able to do. Be able to handle it on two engines or—

Ken: Yeah, and looking at some of the accidents that happen today, that we, myself, call “Pilot Error”—and I think the training we got in the Air Force even back then was really fantastic. And because they get you up so far, and they said, “Okay! Emergency landing! You’ve got no power, you’ve got nothing! You gotta find a place to put that thing down!”

Jim: You mean they shut the engines off?

Ken: They pull the engines. They pull the throttles back, they are still running.

Jim: You gotta land that big thing without power.

Ken: Yeah, yeah, but they wouldn't let those B-24s go down very far, but your other planes they would because you can float them in somewhere and such. You had to get so many hours in each one of these planes. Graduated from B-24s and we went to Geneva, Nebraska.

Jim: Now, we need time here.

Ken: Go.

Jim: Tell me, when was that now? You got to Nebraska?

Ken: It would have been about January—

Jim: Of '45?

Ken: Of '44. Because I graduated in '43. And we went there, and we didn't know for sure what we were going to go into. When we out to camp and they told us we were going to be a B-29 group.

Jim: But you were qualified now as a —

Ken: I am qualified on four engines, yeah.

Jim: Yeah, you were qualified on a 24 [B-24].

Ken: Would be qualified in a 24.

Jim: And now you're going—

Ken: Going into four engine B-29. Superfortress.

Jim: Was that a request or an order?

Ken: Order. They told us.

Jim: They didn't discuss it with you?

Ken: No. They didn't discuss it with us. They told us where we were going.

- Jim: “Guess what, this is what’s gonna happen now.”
- Ken: Yeah, and we had some B-29s at Lincoln where we were at Geneva, Nebraska. And what we would do, we would train there, then we would take a B-17 and fly it down to Puerto Rico at Borinquen Field because they had B-29s down there. And then we would fly our cross-countries. We had to get in two 1,500 mile cross-countries out of Borinquen, out of San Juan. And you go up there and they tell you a briefing and everything, “This is your IP, where you are going to turn around and come back”. It turns out to be a small uninhabited island out in somewhere [laughs] out in the middle of nowhere. So we got one in down there. At 35,000 feet we’re training. We’ve got all the turrets and everything like this—gun turrets in these training ships. Our cross-countries were at 35,000 feet. So, then we came back to the United States to our field, and we had to fly another cross-country here at 35,000 feet. Fine. Then we graduated there, so to speak, and we’re going to California to pick up our airplanes.
- Jim: We have to stop now. Now we are moving to a different plane. Now, I want to know what your reaction was to a monster plane now. Was it more difficult or less difficult, you know, all of these things? Tell me about it.
- Ken: The difference between a B-29 and a B-24 is like driving a Cadillac and a Ford. The B-29 was a Superfortress. It was pressurized and everything like this, and you can talk to your—without hollering and screaming. To get to the back end you had a tunnel to crawl through. Later I guess after the war they got little carts that you could pull yourself back on with wheels and such. Ah, I’m tryin’—
- Jim: The size didn’t scare you, Ken?
- Ken: Yes, the size of that thing—
- Jim: Because the wing was way [laughs] out here.
- Ken: Oh man! Well, they showed you pictures of umpteen people out on the wings of those things. You got into that, the cockpit of that with everything that you had that you didn’t have in a B-24—
- Jim: Oh, the instrumentation, was it doubled?
- Ken: Doubled, yeah, from what you had before, and it was really something. It was a beautiful airplane.
- Jim: It would seem to me that the learning at this point is a lot more involved, a lot more difficult—

Ken: Right.

Jim: And a lot more everything.

Ken: You had cockpit time. You go out, you had pictures of everything like this, but you go out and sit in the cockpit by yourself or with an instructor and memorize everything in that cockpit and what it was and such.

Jim: How long before that became comfortable?

Ken: Quite a few hours [laughs]. Yeah, quite a few hours because it was really something in the difference in the—

Jim: Beautiful airplane.

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: And yet it was the plane that was hastily developed, you know.

Ken: Yes.

Jim: The story—they were constantly modifying it as they were sending them over to combat. They kept changing. Their modifications kept coming and coming because they never really decided what it was finally going to look like until they were well into its missions. Interesting.

Ken: We got to Sacramento. Went out to see our airplane that we were assigned to—crawled in it—no gun turrets. [Jim laughs] Where are the gun turrets? There aren't any. They found out that they could remove the gun turrets and carry a bigger bomb load. And this was our mission, to carry a bigger bomb load. So the two waste gunners in the back were scanners. They were supposed to watch the engines to see if we got any oil leaks.

Jim: That was their job?

Ken: [laughs] That was their job. That was their job. That was their only—

Jim: Highly trained to do this?

Ken: Oh yeah, yeah [both laugh]. And the only thing we had was a tail gun. And so you had a tail gunner.

Jim: And they never got the other guns?

Ken: Nope.

- Jim: They never put them in?
- Ken: Oh no, they stripped them. They took them out. And so where the gun turret was in, in the cockpit area, that is where we kept our flak suits—in that hole. And you had your engineer, and your radio operator, and your navigator, and your bombardier, all sitting behind you in that—
- Jim: Five guys in the—
- Ken: There is one, two, three, four, five, six. You had two pilots, you had an engineer, and a radio operator, and a navigator, and a bombardier.
- Jim: The engineer, what's his responsibility?
- Ken: He had his board there with all of the instruments indicating the action of the plane, the engines and everything like that.
- Jim: He monitored how the engines--
- Ken: He monitored the engines, and before we took off we'd make out the gas load and the bomb load and everything. We'd make out a sheet indicating what we had and everything, and he could take that and put it through his mind and whatever. We didn't have computers at that time to figure out how long we were going to be able to stay in the air and everything with the amount of gas that we had and the amount of the bomb loads.
- Jim: Did it take a long runway to get this thing up in the air?
- Ken: I think our runways were about—I'm guessing 7,500 to 8,000. And we were at Northwest Field in Guam.
- Jim: Did you fly over to Guam from the US?
- Ken: Yes.
- Jim: Nonstop?
- Ken: No, we stopped at Kwajalein. Kwajalein is a sand atoll—
- Jim: I was there once.
- Ken: About six or eight feet above the sea level.
- Jim: Nothing there.

- Ken: Nothing there. Absolutely nothing there. We stopped at Hawaii on the way over, and I never left the base. We were there in about seven or eight hours, something like this. We were going to take off the next morning for Kwajalein, and some of the islands out there were still controlled by Japs. And we landed at Kwajalein and from Kwajalein to Guam.
- Jim: How fast did that aircraft go?
- Ken: At cruise it would be somewhere around 170 to 180.
- Jim: And your range with an average load?
- Ken: Your range—we would, ah, average load in a bomb run—ours was—the longest mission was about fifteen hours, and some of them even took over sixteen. Sixteen hours to go up on the empire. And that was our longest bomb run, the last one. That's what this—
- Jim: That took a lot of fuel then.
- Ken: Oh, yeah. I think it was, ah, I am sure it was over 8,000 gallons. And our engineer would gas our plane at night when it was cool.
- Jim: He was responsible for that?
- Ken: He was responsible for gassing the airplane, and he'd come to us the next morning and say, "Got her all gassed up."
- Jim: Was he an officer?
- Ken: No. He was an enlisted man. The navigator was an officer, the bombardier was an officer, the two pilots were an officer, and we had a master sergeant with much, many years of service. Ah—he was a radio operator, and a peach of a person and everything. And the scanners and the tail gunner were enlisted men.
- Jim: So, you have the scanner and enlisted men were the only other folks on the plane then? Yeah, without any gunners you didn't really need so many.
- Ken: Well, the gunners were scanners. Yeah—they were trained.
- Jim: So there's six and three, there's nine. A crew of nine.
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: But a B-24 which is a lot smaller and the [B]-17 carried a crew of ten.



Ken: Yeah.

Jim: Interesting. I bet they had a lot more—they had all the guns that you didn't have. You didn't have any gun on top.

Ken: No, no.

Jim: You never did?

Ken: Never did. The ones we trained with had the guns and the turrets and everything. You had to walk around them and get around them and everything like this. But when we picked up our planes in Sacramento and went to Hawaii and then to Kwajalein and then to Guam. And checked in there and we had Quonset huts.

Jim: Now, Guam was going to be a base? Your base?

Ken: Yes. Our base, Northwest Field in Guam.

Jim: And tell me now, what was your designation there—I mean, was this the 700 or whatever? What bomb group? What squadron?

Ken: It was the 315<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 16<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 16<sup>th</sup> Group, and we were the 17<sup>th</sup> Squadron, I think it was—yeah.

Jim: 315<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and what's the—

Ken: Yeah, Bomb Wing. 315<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, and we were the 16<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Yeah.

Jim: Oh, this is nice. All right. So it's the 16<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing—

Ken: Bomb Group.

Jim: Bomb Group. And then your 315<sup>th</sup>, what is that?

Ken: That's a Bomb Wing.

Jim: Bomb Wing. Okay. And that's bigger?

Ken: Yeah, that included everybody. Here.

Jim: Now, how many in a bomb group?

Ken: We had—I'd be guessing—

- Jim: The 16<sup>th</sup>, how many? Roughly?
- Ken: I'll say twenty-four—
- Jim: Twenty-four planes?
- Ken: At least.
- Jim: When you flew missions, you flew in groups of how many? A whole group?
- Ken: We flew individually.
- Jim: Never in a team?
- Ken: Never in a team. We had two runways to take off on, and at the end of the runway it was five hundred and some feet down, and here was an air rescue ship down there circling [laughs].
- Jim: Waiting for you?
- Ken: Yeah. But, ah, we would take off alternately on each runway to a calibrated altitude and airspeed to the target. Coming back we would come back at a designated altitude and "max cruise" as we called it. We'd cut it back to whatever we could fly at with everything at "max cruise".
- Jim: To not use much of the gas.
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: What I read is, that the problem with Guam was that it was a little— a little bit too far, and so that if there is any problems you had trouble getting back on the fuel. Is that correct or not?
- Ken: None of us did. But from Guam we had to check into Yule which is out of our way and then to the empire. Where if we could gone direct it would probably cut an hour or better off of our flight time. But we went over Rota, Tinian, Saipan, Iwo—
- Jim: But Iwo wasn't that—we'd already taken that when you got there?
- Ken: Yes, I am sure we had. Yeah.
- Jim: Oh, then it wasn't a problem.

Ken: No, because if we had to land there was no problem, but just don't leave anything in the ship or leave the ship by itself.

Jim: Tell me again now what we're emphasizing here?

Ken: If you had to land at Iwo, do not leave any your personal belongings in the ship, [Jim laughs] and be sure that you kept your .45 on you, which you were issued, and don't leave the ship unguarded.

Jim: Who were you protecting from, the Americans?

Ken: Yeah [laughs].

Jim: Can't believe these guys would come and nip stuff out of your plane.

Ken: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Souvenirs.

Ken: And if we ever had a problem we could of landed at Vladivostok in Russia.

Jim: Then you wouldn't get out though.

Ken: Well, they didn't tell us that [laughs].

Jim: One of my high school classmates was in a B-25. He spent two years in a Russian prison camp.

Ken: Yeah, well, it—I think we were on good terms with Russia by this time.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: You weren't a threat to them anymore.

Ken: No, but, ah—

Jim: But that was an option for you.

Ken: That was an option.

Jim: If you had trouble.

Ken: Yes. Yeah.

Jim: Generally your targets were selected by someone else, and then you got the word the morning you were supposed to depart or—

Ken: Yes.

Jim: Generally you left when? 8:00? 9:00?

Ken: No. We left about, ah— noon to 2 o'clock in the afternoon because--

Jim: Generally your target was Tokyo, or not necessarily?

Ken: No, our targets were oil refineries—exclusively oil refineries. All oil refineries at that time in Japan were built on reclaimed land with seawalls around them. And we didn't do a good job on one, and they sent us back. Nimitz [Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz; Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet] was kind of, and the story is, peeved because we sunk it. [Both laugh] But, ah, if you could knock the seawalls down and knock out the oil refinery they were done.

Jim: Can you tell me what you carried now?

Ken: Ah, boy, I don't remember what now.

Jim: Well, roughly. One thousand pounders or bigger?

Ken: Oh, at least a thousand pounders— at least a thousand pounders.

Jim: How many of those could you hike upstairs there?

Ken: About eight, sixteen, ah—twenty-four. Eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty-four. We at least had somewhere around twenty-four to thirty bombs onboard.

Jim: Of the big ones?

Ken: Yeah, the big ones.

Jim: And what about the firebombs?

Ken: None.

Jim: You didn't carry them.

Ken: No, we didn't carry any firebombs.

Jim: That wasn't your duty?

Ken: No, unh, unh.

Jim: So you never had to go in over Tokyo at a thousand feet like LeMay [Gen. Curtis Lemay, “Father of the Strategic Air Command”] wanted those guys to do?

Ken: Nope. No, we didn’t.

Jim: You weren’t part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force then?

Ken: Yes.

Jim: Oh, you were but not the—

Ken: We were part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force.

Jim: But not the ones that were assigned to Tokyo to firebomb.

Ken: No. Our training in the States went by the wayside when we got over to Guam. Our altitude was then 8,000 to 16,000 feet because they found about the airstream. The first B-29s over there, when they went to bomb, by the time they got over the target the bombardier hadn’t even got his bombsights set. He’d go to an IP [initial point] and then the target and “Shoo,”— they’re gone. So they dropped us down to 8,000 to 16,000 feet.

Jim: You could handle that better.

Ken: Yeah, we could handle it. There was no problem with the—

Jim: Okay. Now, what about the opposition now, Ken?

Ken: I would say we had none.

Jim: Never saw a MiG?

Ken: Never saw a Japanese airplane in the sky.

Jim: And this is in still 1944?

Ken: And it’s night.

Jim: Right, but this is before the last year of the war then?

Ken: Yeah.

- Jim: Okay.
- Ken: Yeah, it ended in '45, right?
- Jim: Yeah. August, yeah.
- Ken: Yeah, and so one night we are coming off the empire, and here's all these planes, fighter planes, comin' underneath us, and we couldn't figure out why they weren't coming up. We found out when we got home that the Navy had a strike the same night. But in flying a different altitude and everything, when a ship would come over he may be at 8,000 feet. The next one up above it could have been at 16,000 feet, and evidently they did not have the equipment to pick us up with anti-aircraft or anything like this.
- Jim: You weren't bothered by anti-aircraft?
- Ken: No. Not bothered by anti-aircraft or anything.
- Jim: Amazing.
- Ken: Of course you're [laughs]—you are watching going over the target, and you are not necessarily looking at what's going on outside there at that point in time.
- Jim: You're just trying to get the hell out of there.
- Ken: You're just trying to get the hell out of there. After we dropped our bombs we would veer off and turn off and go to the altitude that we were suppose to be back, which was probably the same altitude we were flying at, or even lower, and go to "max cruise" and come home.
- Jim: But you did this on an individual basis?
- Ken: Yes.
- Jim: Was there a line of you? I mean one behind the other?
- Ken: Well, I looked one time, and there was one up above us with its bomb bay doors open.
- Jim: And you wondered about that.
- Ken: And I wondered [laughs].
- Jim: You couldn't communicate with him?

- Ken: No. No, we didn't. Because, see, they didn't know who was underneath us or anything like this, but--
- Jim: I am sure that you hoped very dearly that he knew *you* were there.
- Ken: Yeah. Hopefully. But there was never any formation. We never even flew any formation in training. It was all individual. It was really an experience that ah, I'll never forget as far as that goes. In fact, I've gone to both of my grandsons' classes and talked. They'd ask me who I was, and of course I'm a Shriner and everything like this. And then they ask what I did during the war and such, and I relate minimal to it—as to what it was and everything.
- Jim: Tell me about any of your troubles that you had on any of your missions.
- Ken: None, fortunately.
- Jim: The plane responded?
- Ken: The plane responded beautifully all the way. No engine problems or anything—one take off. One take off we had, we're going down the runway—of course you check your engines out first. Well, we're going down the runway, and the four engines were not going in sync, and so I started to readjust the throttles, and the engineer is doing the same thing, and so we aborted. And came back around, and I said, "Okay, we'll put the booster power on this time." So there is no question that they're going to all get boosted. And so we took off. But that was the only problem we ever had in taking off, landing or anything like that.
- Jim: Your plane didn't require a lot of maintenance?
- Ken: Whatever maintenance was done was standard stuff done on the flight line, and the engineer would oversee it making sure that everything was done.
- Jim: Well, that's wonderful. What about the atomic bomb? Did you know any of those fellas or did you have any relationship with them?
- Ken: No. We were on the flight line to take off on a mission, and the word came down the flight line you are not going for a while. You are not going for a while—and it was several hours that we sat on the flight line wondering what was going on—on the first time atomic bomb. And we didn't know it until we got back that the atomic bomb had been dropped.
- Jim: You never had any air attacks from Japan on Guam while you were there?

- Ken: No. No, it was pretty well secured. At North Field there was a P-47 [Thunderbolt, fighter plane] group that would go up—
- Jim: North Field?
- Ken: North Field on Guam. This P-47 group—the story was, I never was confirmed it, would go up and bomb Rota everyday, which was a little island sixty miles away. And supposedly the Japs would get an airplane in there. I don't know where they got it from or anything like this. But, ah, digressing back, after we got to Guam, our first mission was to bomb Truk. And Truk claimed more B-24s than any other island in the Pacific. And when we got over Truk—
- Jim: It was well fortified.
- Ken: Yes, when we got over Truk you could hardly see it and everything. Of course, the bombardier and navigator and everything had worked it out. It was a cloudy and dark night and everything like this, and we dropped our bombs and came home. For this mission we got no credit. That was a practice mission [laughs], and it was one of the worst ones you could ever experience and stuff.
- Jim: But you said you flew all of your missions there over target at night.
- Ken: Over target at night. Yup. Our last mission, which this book is written about, they claimed we cleaned out the bomb dump. Because both the atomic bombs had been dropped. And so they loaded us with everything and anything that was left, supposedly. And our last mission we went over the empire north of Tokyo all the way to the northwest corner of Japan of their last remaining oil refinery that we hadn't bombed. And we got credit for a little over a 101 percent of wiping that oil refinery out. And supposedly, according to the book, that was their last hope of making any gasoline or anything like this and of putting anything together because they didn't have any gasoline.
- Jim: How many missions did you fly?
- Ken: I flew fifteen. We were supposed to fly twenty-five supposedly, quote, and then we could go home [laughs].
- Jim: That was the deal.
- Ken: In front of our Quonset hut I had taken some rocks and made a little border around there and cleaned it all out. And then I put, "To Go" in letters there and started with twenty-five. And each time we'd come back



I'd take one off, and then after it was all over then I made a zero there. And some of the guys would come by and go, "What's that? What's that?" And I said, "That's all we got, there isn't any more." [laughs]

Jim: And your quarters there were adequate?

Ken: Very adequate.

Jim: You had somebody to clean up for you?

Ken: You—cleaned up.

Jim: You had no natives around?

Ken: No, no. No natives. All of the natives were down around island command, the center of the island. We didn't have any up in our area. In fact, all of our kitchen personnel and everything like that were Army personnel, Air Force personnel. We built our own officers club up there. Scroungers went from here to there to get wood and things like this, and the engineers that knew about construction and everything. We had a beautiful officers' club. I'll bet you the bar was from here to that wall—

Jim: Oh, my!

Ken: Long and we hand sanded it and everything like this. And they'd go down to the Marines or the Navy and they'd trade this or that for what we wanted and booze, and food, or whatever.

Jim: Did you have a mess hall?

Ken: Had a mess hall. A very good mess hall. Except when we first got over there it was cooking, and then it went to rations which we couldn't figure out. So that's when [**End of Tape One, Side One**] I was telling you we'd go down to 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Motor Battalion with my friend from Louisville, Kentucky to the Marines. And then we'd go down to the island command to my friend with the Navy down there with the USO girls and the brass [laughs] and everything.

Jim: What did you trade for goodies from these people?

Ken: They'd trade for whiskey, or food, or whatever they had that you wanted for your—

Jim: What did you offer them for the whiskey?

Ken: I don't know what they offered them.

Jim: Money?

Ken: No, there was never any money; it was all barter. Some guys went down one night, and they came back with a big ham off of the ship. And here we got a big sheet of metal out there— we got a fire underneath it, and we are cooking and eating this ham and slicing it off [laughs] out in the middle of the field. We had—for awhile at the north end of our runways they would find where there'd been a fire out there, and somebody was cooking something like. And they finally determined that there were still some Japs that hadn't been caught, and so they baited them and finally caught them. They'd go into camps someplace—they were brazen—they'd go into camp and steal food or whatever.

Jim: If you're hungry you will do a lot of things.

Ken: Yeah, yeah. When we landed after the war we went over to the Phil— [Approx. 30 sec. pause in recording] and there's garbage dumps, so to speak, out there, and they had to have MPs out there to keep the natives away from that garbage dump to come in and scavenge for food. I think it was Clark Field. And then they picked up the PW supplies, went back to Guam, and then flew them up to the empire at certain places up there where the PW's were stationed.

Jim: Did you bring back any people? Personnel?

Ken: No. You didn't land. You dropped it. Yeah.

Jim: Open the bomb bay and let her go?

Ken: Yeah. When they went back, I did not get on that mission. So I don't know just exactly what they did other than they just opened the bomb bay and dropped them. Because they couldn't—evidently could not land. That was when we were on the Philippines. We went into town and found a place where there was an ice cream store. We sat there, and I betcha had four ice cream cones [laughs] before we got out of there. And then we got downtown Manila—then there was trucks and carriers and everything else, but they were all driven by enlisted men. I think every enlisted man on the Philippines had a motor vehicle. You think he'd stop and pick you up? No, he wouldn't stop and pick you up. We ended up fortunately, ah—they told us where to go, and we ended up at a campsite that night with tents. And got back to our airplanes the next day and took off. That was quite an experience in itself and the people and things like this.

Jim: Manila was just almost destroyed, wasn't it?

Ken: It didn't seem to be. When I got downtown—I think it was dark by the time we had walked downtown to Manila because we got a couple of rides from our camp or airport downtown, but it didn't seem that bad. Of course, it wasn't leveled, I don't think. Yeah, from memory.

Jim: Then—so when did you start coming home?

Ken: We started coming home on the number of points that we had. There was some brass that took a B-29 from Guam to Washington, D.C. They wanted to do that. Of course, only brass could do that, but depending on the number of points that you had is when you could bring a ship [plane] back to California and leave it. And then you went on a troop trip to Chicago.

Jim: A train.

Ken: A train, troop train to Chicago. And that was an experience in itself because that wound through the mountains and everything. If you have never been on a train in the mountains [laughs] that's an experience, and it was. Of course, I got back to Chicago and my wife met me, but all I had were summer khakis and everything like this. Because when you got to Guam you shipped everything back. They made you take everything because they weren't telling you where you were going to go. So I got back there and it was 5 below. I remember that, and it was cold [laughs]—it was cold.

Jim: And you were out shortly thereafter?

Ken: Yes.

Jim: Well, it sounds like you had a wonderful experience.

Ken: I did.

Jim: And you lucked out here and there.

Ken: Yes, very much so, yeah. It was a personal experience as well as an educational experience of the whole thing.

Jim: So, when you got out, did you use your GI Bill?

Ken: I went to work for my father at the Yellow Cab Company. He had an insurance agency and such.

Jim: In Madison?

- Ken: In Madison. When I was born we lived in Janesville a month, and then Dad moved to Madison and started a livery business and such here. And, ah, oh, I would say it was, oh, six, eight months that he sold out to his manager and myself. So, there was two of us partners that had the Yellow Cab Company. And then my partner passed away and then I bought his estate out of it. So I was in the cab business for about thirty years.
- Jim: Thirty years?
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: Wow. And you've got a lot of kids?
- Ken: We were fortunate that we had one daughter. And, ah, we had been trying for nine years or better after I got out of the service to have a child. And after Sue was born the doctor told us that we had a negative/positive blood situation and if anything had happened in the birth that the baby could have died. And back then they didn't know how to handle this.
- Jim: Is this the Rh [Factor] thing you're talkin' about?
- Ken: Yeah. So Sue was our only child. And she has two boys and that was all she wanted. One is 18, and one is 16 now—down in Janesville. She ended up in Janesville out in the country out where my mother was born and raised.
- Jim: Well, the family has made a complete circle.
- Ken: Yes, it has. Yeah.
- Jim: Oh, that's nice. Did you join any veterans organizations?
- Ken: No. I was asked to and everything like this and begged to stay in the Reserves. In fact, I was in the Reserves inactive for about twenty years before they wrote me out.
- Jim: I did that, too.
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: But then after awhile it's pointless 'cause [unintelligible] do anything.
- Ken: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Well, that's good. But you are interested in your Bomb Wing Association. That seems like a pretty good group.

- Ken: Yes, it is, and there's some—
- Jim: Very active.
- Ken: Very active. They keep track of everybody, and they've done a very good job of just about finding everybody.
- Jim: No kiddin'?
- Ken: Yeah.
- Jim: And do you keep track of your shipmates?
- Ken: Never have. Ah, I did one time. We were down to Florida, and I stopped in Tennessee and looked up one of the gunners. He was the mayor of this little town [both laugh]. And then he called me a few years, oh, it's probably been ten years ago. He moved out of there and got into business and everything like this. He had called just about every member of our crew that he could find. The master sergeant was out in California somewhere, and he told me where the others were. But we just never did keep track of each other like some crews.
- Jim: Primarily because they are so far away?
- Ken: Yeah. Yeah, I remember one was in Virginia, and another one was in Ohio, and one was Oklahoma—
- Jim: Your co-pilot?
- Ken: I was a co-pilot, or a pilot, and then I was an airplane commander. That was the two designations that they had for me. Yeah.
- Jim: Well, that's a shame you couldn't keep—I would think this association would know where these guys are.
- Ken: Well, they do, but I just never have. My friend from Louisville, he's kept track of his crew people and everything like this. But some do and some don't, and we just hadn't.
- Jim: Well, that sounds pretty good. I can't think of anymore to ask you.
- Ken: Okay.
- Jim: Anything you forgot to tell me?

Ken: Well, I'll probably think of all those things I forgot to tell you. This—

Jim: What's this? [rustling sound]

Ken: This is the—

Jim: Oh, this is the memorial.

Ken: That's the memorial they want to put in Colorado at the Air Force park there.

Jim: Is this Wing [Bomb Wing Association] going to do this or is just the Air Force going to do it?

Ken: The Wing.

Jim: The Wing.

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: Oh, they have one for the Liberator [B-24] too, and the Mustang [P-51].

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: So, they want you to contribute to all of this stuff?

Ken: Oh, yeah. Always. Anytime you get a letter it's—

Jim: I know. I get the letters. That VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], you'd think I belong. I get a letter about every month.

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: Lookin' for money.

Ken: They tried to get me to join in, and I just didn't want to. I'd had enough.

Jim: I wasn't interested. I didn't fuss with that. But they hadn't lost track of me because I'm building the monument in Washington with Bob Dole, you know. They keep asking me for more dough for that, you know.

Ken: Oh, sure. Do you have all of the floors in this building?

Jim: No.

Ken: No?

Jim: Just two here.

Ken: Just two.

Jim: They are going to have another one upstairs.

Ken: Yeah. Well, then—the [Wisconsin Historical Society] museum over there. Do you take in the Hub [former men’s clothing store in Madison, WI], too?

Jim: Well, that’s part of the [Wisconsin Veterans] museum, where the Hub was. That museum across the street has nothing to do with this one.

Ken: No. A friend of mine Bob Schmitz, his dad started the Hub and he was in my high school class.

Jim: And he grew up on the street next to me. I have known him *all* of my life.

Ken: Oh?

Jim: I eat lunch with him *every* Tuesday.

Ken: His wife—

Jim: I’ll say hello for you.

Ken: His wife was in my grade school at Randall School. In fact, the picture that she still has— I don’t know what happened to mine—

Jim: She’ll be delighted when I tell her—

Ken: But I’m sitting next to Mary Alice. And I’ve run into them out at Hilldale a couple times walking out there. They walk out there.

Jim: Yes, I know, they live right there. Well, that’s interesting, see. Yeah, as I say, I have known them all of my life—

Ken: I’ll be darned.

Jim: And we’re very close friends. Very nice.

Ken: Yeah, very nice people.

Jim: They are wonderful.

Ken: Yeah.

**[End of Interview]**