

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
PAUL PETERSON
Ball Turret Gunner, Air Force, World War II
2000

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Paul Peterson (1923-2004). Oral History Interview, 2000.

Master: 1 video recording (90 min.); ½ inch, color.

User: 2 sound cassettes (90 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Paul Peterson discusses his World War II service as a Ball Turret Gunner based out of Italy, flying missions over Germany in addition to Romanian oil fields. He reflects on the two occasions he was forced to parachute from the B-29, once in Italy, once in occupied France, as well as being rescued by the combined efforts of the Free French, the French Underground, and others. Peterson also explains the relationship that he kept with his rescuers after the war.

Biographical Sketch:

Paul Peterson (1923-2004) served as a B-29 Ball Turret Gunner in WWII before being shot down over occupied France. After hiding with the French underground and being rescued, he began civilian life in Madison (Wisconsin) as a pastor.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Colin Robinson, 2012.

Transcription reviewed by Beverly Phillips, 2012.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: Yes sir, when were you born?

Peterson: August 19th, 1923.

McIntosh: A month before I was.

Peterson: Oh, is that right? Well, then we're both seventy-six.

McIntosh: And Virgos.

Peterson: What's that?

McIntosh: And Virgos.

Peterson: Oh, yes. [both laugh]

McIntosh: And where were you born, sir?

Peterson: I was born in a small Iowa town with a famous name of Rembrandt.

McIntosh: Oh my goodness. [Spelled] d-t?

Peterson: D-t, yes.

McIntosh: And when did you enter military service?

Peterson: Ah, 1943.

McIntosh: And where did you go for that?

Peterson: Ah well, I went to various places and—training?

McIntosh: Well, I mean, where'd you go first? Right.

Peterson: Training?

McIntosh: Yes.

Peterson: Went to--I think it was Miami Beach.

McIntosh: For Basic?

Peterson: Yes.

McIntosh: In the Army. You were Army?

Peterson: I was in the Air Force.

McIntosh: Air Force, right.

Peterson: And we marched up and down those sandy beaches and stayed in a nice hotel. Yeah, government had taken over.

McIntosh: Then after that, then what?

Peterson: Then I went to Buckley Field, Denver, Colorado, and from there I went to Lowry Field.

McIntosh: What did you do at Buckley Field?

Peterson: I heard all about guns. I'd never had a gun in my hand, so they didn't take much for granted.

McIntosh: What kind of guns? You don't mean rifles, you mean air guns?

Peterson: We started, I think with BB guns. And we shot at little moving targets. Well first, we shot at stationary, then we moved into the moving targets like you might see at a carnival or so. And then, we got on a flat top truck, and we wouldn't be moving, and [we were] shooting at moving targets.

McIntosh: With a shotgun?

Peterson: Yes, I think so. And there from then on, we moved into the air. I was at Fort Myers, Florida, for my flight training.

McIntosh: Back to Florida.

Peterson: Back to Florida, yes. Then I was gathered together with a crew in Casper, Wyoming.

McIntosh: [Laughs] Back and forth.

Peterson: Back and forth, that's the way the Army Air Force operated.

McIntosh: Did they have you--were you given a job then?

Peterson: Yes, yes, I had the job as ball turret gunner. Yeah. And there we trained most of the winter. It was very cold—

McIntosh: In the air?

Peterson: In the air, yes, all in the air. We flew all over that country out there in the dead of winter. Casper is a cold town, but we survived it all.

McIntosh: So tell me about shooting from a ball turret. I've never interviewed anyone who did that. What special problems did you face?

Peterson: Well, you understand that the ball turret revolves and moves up and down. You can't get into the ball turret taking off or landing; it has to be raised up for that.

McIntosh: Was this for a B-24 or a '17? [B-17]

Peterson: B-24, right. And so after we were airborne, then I would go down into my turret. I would lower it and get into it. Then I would revolve all around, 360 degrees almost.

McIntosh: And you had a twin .50 caliber machine gun?

Peterson: Yes, right.

McIntosh: Now I suppose if anyone was claustrophobic, that wouldn't be a job for him because you're really confined. That's my impression.

Peterson: No, it wouldn't. Right, right. You are in a ball really [mimics position]—

McIntosh: Right, and hunched up—

Peterson: Like this, you know.

McIntosh: Facing downwards, sort of.

Peterson: Well, yes, you had to have— Your sight was in front of you like that, and that was coordinated with the two .50s.

McIntosh: I would think getting cramps in your legs would be a problem.

Peterson: Well, you got used to it, but you were in there sometimes for long periods of time.

McIntosh: Did you ask to get out when nothing was going on so you could stretch your legs?

Peterson: Oh, you could in friendly territory. Only when you got into enemy territory would you have to be alert, to be in your position.

McIntosh: So, part of your extra duties then was to scan the territory, and look for fighters, and look for things on the ground. They depended on your eyes, too.

Peterson: Oh yes, right. One thing about a crew like that, you always looked after each other. You're very close to that group of people flying in that plane. I had a wonderful crew.

McIntosh: Did anyone give you any help? You know, while you were in there, while you were in the ball turret? Bring food or drink to you or anything?

Peterson: Yes. I'll tell you how they helped. One time, our plane was hit right in the middle in the bomb bay section, with a big 88 millimeter shell from the ground. And it was a direct hit. And it went through the fuselage and up out the top of the plane, and that was right over my head, where I was down in the ball turret. Of course, it was a dud. Had it not been, we would've been blown to pieces. But I had noticed that my oxygen supply had been shot away by the shell that went through the top, and you don't know when you're in need of oxygen. You have no way of knowing, no, you feel good. But there's a little warning light that goes on when you're out of oxygen, and I spotted that and got out of my turret. And the fellow at the waist position, he noticed that my thing was dangling, and so he gave me his oxygen. He took his mask off and put it on mine and we went back and forth for awhile so that we both would be supplied. So that's one thing that happened. For me it was critical. Yes, indeed; lucky, yeah.

McIntosh: Life-saving. Where were you at the time?

Peterson: Oh, let's see, I'm trying to think. We were over a target in Europe.

McIntosh: Where did you fly from? We didn't get into that.

Peterson: Okay, we were based in Italy, southern Italy.

McIntosh: You're in the 9th Air—I mean 15th Air Force?

Peterson: 15th right, yup. We were at a small Italian town called Spinazzola.

McIntosh: And how many missions did you have there?

Peterson: I flew forty-three.

McIntosh: Forty-three. Your go home time was fifty?

Peterson: Fifty, yes, ordinarily.

McIntosh: But the war ended before—?

Peterson: No, no, no the war didn't, the war was still going on. Our pilot had been told that we had one more mission to go. Fifty was not a set number. Sometimes they would let you go earlier, especially if you'd had some rough going, you know, and we did had a lot of rough missions. We flew up into Germany and the Ploiesti [Romania] oil fields. That was kind of a popular target for us. Hitler needed that oil, and he defended it heavily.

McIntosh: Yes, I know about that. Bill Carow, C-a-r-o-w, lives on the west side of Madison [and] was a pilot in a B-24 who flew the Ploiesti raids.

Peterson: Oh, okay, then you know. If he told you about them you'll know what they were like. They were, they were uh, heavily defended.

McIntosh: Well, and you came in so low.

Peterson: Well actually, I wasn't down that low, we had all high. The first ones that were made from North Africa, they were low, and that was, uh, sort of a suicide—

McIntosh: Yeah, that's what he thought. Of his group, he said he was the only one ship who got out of there.

Peterson: Okay, I believe that. We flew several times over there. If I remember right, five times I was over Ploiesti and I dreaded each and every one of them.

McIntosh: Did you have trouble getting ammunition? It didn't run out?

Peterson: No. You had so much ammunition that you carried, and when that was gone, it was gone.

McIntosh: Did you share your ammunition with the waist gunners, or did everybody have their own?

Peterson: It was a different kind of setup for your turret, so it would've been very difficult to pull that stuff out of there, of a regular—

McIntosh: If you ran out, you just ran out until you got back to the ground.

Peterson: You ran out, yeah, you still pulled the trigger [both laugh] but it wasn't doing anything.

McIntosh: So did you have an opportunity to shoot at other airplanes?

Peterson: Oh, yes. We shot at the enemy, yeah.

McIntosh: Did we hit anything?

Peterson: I get asked that question a lot. Really, it's hard to tell. We had ten guns and we flew very tight formations, so there's gunners from all over on the target, and how would you ever know? But, our group, as a group, we were given credit for several fighters.

McIntosh: Most of those airplanes were the Me 109s? [Messerschmitt 109]

Peterson: Yes, yes. Messerschmitt, Me 109 yup. In fact, that was one of the popular German planes in that area.

McIntosh: And your aircraft performed well?

Peterson: Oh yes, the B-24 was a great plane. It was tough; it could take a lot of punishment and still make it home for you. I would come in literally on a wing and a prayer with 'em.

McIntosh: Oh really? Tell me about a mission there like that.

Peterson: Okay. One mission that I remember particularly was coming home and discovering that one of our landing gears was not operating. So that meant we had to come in—

McIntosh: So you couldn't put it down manually?

Peterson: No, no.

McIntosh: So you never could or just the instance?

Peterson: In this instance we were unable to, and we had to come in on sort of a belly landing. And, uh [pause]. Excuse me, I get a little emotional sometimes. And I had a very skillful pilot, he was tops. And, he uh, he worked us hard in our training. He would go out and, uh, we had more crews than we had planes and so we had a rotating thing. He would hang around over operations begging for a plane when it wasn't our turn. So he would come round us up in the barracks, "Come on boys, we're going up." We used to complain a little bit; after all it was twenty below on the ground. But we were very thankful that we had all that experience, and

especially our pilots. We came in for a landing knowing that we had only one wheel. So we had to come in like this, see? And he held it as long as he possibly could before he dropped the other wing. And so we uh, we uh, of course shot off the runway to the side, and we got thrown around a little bit, but it was a good landing, no one was hurt.

McIntosh: Now where did you go? You had to get out of your ball turret. What did you do?

Peterson: I was way out of my ball turret.

McIntosh: So what did you hang on to then? What was your position on landing, I guess is what I'm asking.

Peterson: I had my back up against a bulkhead or something.

McIntosh: No particular spot?

Peterson: No, wherever you could squeeze in. Yeah.

McIntosh: That was a tribute to his ability—.

Peterson: Skill, yeah. He went on to be a commercial airline—.

McIntosh: Oh he did? Do you still keep in contact?

Peterson: Oh yes, we're friends. We're still friends.

McIntosh: Where does he live?

Peterson: He lives in Spokane, Washington.

McIntosh: Any more of the crew still around?

Peterson: Two of the fellows are gone, they passed away. So there are eight of us that are still living.

McIntosh: Did anyone get wounded on any of your missions?

Peterson: Yes, yes. We had, I think, seven out of the ten were wounded in some way. Some not very much.

McIntosh: Shrapnel, pieces of shrapnel and superficial wounds?

Peterson: Right, superficial. But otherwise, we had one, uh, our nose gunner lost a leg.

McIntosh: Whoa, that's not superficial.

Peterson: No, that's not superficial. That was one of our earlier missions. He was in the nose, and a piece of artillery came up and hit the nose, and it went through a knee, so he came home to the States, and the war was pretty much over for him.

McIntosh: Did someone drag him out of his position and put a tourniquet on him? Hard to remember?

Peterson: Yes, I think our navigator did.

McIntosh: I'm sure the plastic bubble was destroyed. So he was out in the open with his leg shattered.

Peterson: Pretty much so, pretty much so. The navigator seemed to be the one that would be right there to give first aid. He's the closest and he has to be away from his navigation tools, but he was there to give first aid when it was needed.

McIntosh: How long were your missions, generally how long?

Peterson: Well, that depended on how far your target was.

McIntosh: Of course, but I mean generally.

Peterson: Oh, I would say seven, eight hours, and up to ten.

McIntosh: Four hours to a target is a long time to wait.

Peterson: Right, right.

McIntosh: Did you eat generally on the way or not?

Peterson: Yes, yes. We'd have a lunch with us, a box of K Rations. So we did eat.

McIntosh: Did you keep a supply of water on board?

Peterson: Yeah, we had water.

McIntosh: And you had a first aid kit to deal with these things? There must've been some provisions made for that.

Peterson: Oh yes, each plane had their own first aid kit. But I came through without a scratch. Well, I take that back. I don't even count it, but on one of my

parachute jumps I hit a tree, and branches of the tree caused some little cuts in my neck.

McIntosh: What's this parachute jump? That's not standard for a B-24 crew.

Peterson: Oh no, well I made two jumps.

McIntosh: We have to have that. Tell me about those.

Peterson: See, I wear the Caterpillar [Caterpillar Club pin]. You know what that is.

McIntosh: No, tell me about that.

Peterson: Alright, okay. That's given to an airman who makes a jump to save his life. And twice I had to do that.

McIntosh: Tell me about each time, that's why you're here. [laughs]

Peterson: The first time was early in my service, and we were friendly territory in Italy and we ran out of gas. Now, that's not so serious when you're out on I-90 but when you're way up in the air—yes, yes. It happened when I was flying with another crew. I was a replacement, see? One day the ball gunner came up sick or something, so they put me in there. And I was with a different crew, I didn't know those fellas. And I just say, I don't think it would've happened if my pilot would have been in charge.

McIntosh: It's a gross, gross error. Well he would've checked—.

Peterson: He was careful. He wouldn't take any chances with his own life or with the life of anyone else. This pilot made a bad mistake, error in judgment. We were close. We were within fifty kilometers of our home base.

McIntosh: He didn't feel he could glide in?

Peterson: He didn't feel he could glide in, in fact the plane was going down, one after the other the four engines, I'm telling you.

McIntosh: So he said everybody off?

Peterson: Yes, we all got out.

McIntosh: Did you do it in order? Now that you're—.

Peterson: We didn't have any set order.

McIntosh: Where did you get off?

Peterson: I got out through the bomb bay. My chute opened and all was well. I had a, well, the first time I had a landing in the Italian peasant's farm. I was coming down between buildings, and there was a pole sticking up out of the ground of his yard, and it looked like I was going to set down on that, and I knew I didn't want to do that. So, being quite close to the ground, I used my body, a swerve, a swing, and in doing so my landing was not perfect. And ordinarily, you know, you jump with your feet, legs, knees bent and that's the way it's done.

McIntosh: So you landed on your backside.

Peterson: Yes, and I was knocked out. My head hit, slammed against the ground, and I was knocked out. But I was alright. I came and landed.

McIntosh: The farmer come up and pull you out of your chute?

Peterson: As a matter of fact, when I came to there was a farmer with a pitchfork over me, because this was an area of Italy that had just recently been liberated—

McIntosh: So they had just recently changed sides.

Peterson: —and they thought that I might have been a German airman who was come back again. So they weren't taking any chances.

McIntosh: So how did we straighten that out?

Peterson: "Americano, Americano," you know. He bought it, and that was the end of that. Then the second—

McIntosh: How did you get to your base? Excuse me, for dwelling on details but it's fascinating.

Peterson: Oh, alright. They sent a truck after us.

McIntosh: You had to make a phone call, is that the way?

Peterson: Somehow, somehow, somebody did—

McIntosh: They knew that you were around there somewhere.

Peterson: Somebody made a call, and they came after us with the truck.

McIntosh: Did everybody get out of that airplane?

Peterson: Everybody got out. The worst injury was a broken leg. And that wasn't uncommon with jumps, and uh, then the second time was the last mission I was on, my forty-third. We hit Munich, Germany. Munich, Germany was a tough target for us. We'd been up there before, and uh, I dreaded it.

McIntosh: So much anti-aircraft fire?

Peterson: Yes, and fighters. We'd get 'em both. They'd pick us up on coming in, and then of course when we got over the target, when the ack-ack [anti-aircraft fire] was coming at us, they went off by themselves, and then we got hit by anti-aircraft 88 millimeter shells, and lots of it. And if you were lucky enough to get out of the target area, then fighters would pick you up again. See? So it was a tough, they were tough missions. And so we lost two engines, and a lot of our plane was shot up. As a matter of fact, the navigator's equipment, some of that was—.

McIntosh: Destroyed?

Peterson: Yes, and so that was a problem for the navigator, being unable to use some of his equipment.

McIntosh: But you were in formation, you could follow along with others? No, not then?

Peterson: No, we lost formation, long, long before.

McIntosh: Everybody went their own way?

Peterson: Well, they tried to stay together as long as they could, but we were out of it, we were on our own and—uh, I'm probably taking too much time on this.

McIntosh: There's no rush.

Peterson: Oh, okay. Anyway, the navigator, being unable to give our pilot any kind of a correct heading to go to Switzerland-- You know, you figure you were going to remember your map of Europe and Switzerland, Germany, France, they all come together at a point, Italy too. We thought we were in Switzerland when the plane wouldn't fly anymore, so the pilot ordered us to jump, which we did. But we didn't land in Switzerland. We had landed in France, occupied France. I didn't realize it because a French farmer came out of his field. I was dangling in a tree nearby. Swung into it, see, and got caught up there. This farmer came to me and he was all excited, and he was frantically trying to tell me something, and that was, "You've got to get out of here." And he made a gesture that looked like this

[mimics gesture]. That meant “Get going, get moving,” see? And so, I came down from there, from the—.

McIntosh: You get yourself out of that harness? You had to drop?

Peterson: Yeah, well, the harness was attached to your body, but the chute was up there.

McIntosh: You had to drop from that point?

Peterson: Yes, well you kind of climbed down the branches. So we started running, and he was telling me in his own way, and I just had to guess because—.

McIntosh: He sort of pointed to where you should go.

Peterson: Yeah, right, he pointed the way we should go, and then that there were German garrisons nearby. One on each side of us.

McIntosh: Now, you keep saying "Us." You were with a couple of the other mates?

Peterson: Well at the time I was all alone. But, you know, they were very well organized, the Free French were. They would spot these crews that came down; we weren't the only crew that came down in France. Maybe hundreds of them. They were well aware of what to do. And so they'd come to each one of us. You know, we were spread out all over an area, and they would— One man would come for me, another one for another, and eventually we would all be gathered together, see? But we were— He took me into the woods, and that was critical. We needed to get out of sight right away, so eventually then the French Underground was contacted for us. These were just whoever happened to be around, but they were well organized. They all knew what to do.

McIntosh: So did they put you in a house or did you stay in the woods?

Peterson: We were in the woods, and we stayed in the woods for two, three days.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

McIntosh: Nothing to eat?

Peterson: They would bring us food, what precious little they had, and I was so impressed with the brotherly love of these people who get to know you from Adam, and yet they put their lives on the line for you. That's impressive, and it left a lasting impression on me. I was filled with such great gratitude for what these people did, and I never forgot that. Who can forget when someone saves your life?

So, these people knew what they were getting into. There were posters all around in this area. It went something like this: "Any French man who gives aid to a downed American flyer will be shot. Any French woman who gives aid will go to a concentration camp. And thirdly, anyone who gives information as to the whereabouts of American airmen, they will receive a reward of 10,000 francs." So you see, they had the choice [laughs] of being shot or concentration camp or you take the money. That was quite a decision. Okay, but that's just to illustrate what these people did.

McIntosh: I understand, I appreciate that. What did they do after a couple of days? Where did they take you or direct you?

Peterson: We were in touch with just individuals who would bring us some food, and again I have to stress that food was hard to come by. Maybe not so much for the farmers, because they could raise vegetables and things like that. But in other instances, they wouldn't have had enough for themselves, and yet they were willing to share with you. That's uh, that's impressive. So we were just, we were just kind of given an opportunity to get a little rest, and I think there were three fellows who had been wounded, including our pilot, who was the last one out of the plane. And we were close to the ground when he jumped, and he hit himself on part of the fuselage, and was cut above his eye, and some damage to his eye was noted. A couple of the others also had some wounds. We needed a little time too, for these guys to kind of recover a little bit. Then we had an arrangement with 'em, whereby if the church bell in the village below us would ring, that would tip us off that they were looking for us in that area. And so I think it was on about the third day in the middle of the night, the church bell rang. And that gave us the clue that we had to move out. And so we moved out, and we eventually ended up in the hands of the French Underground.

McIntosh: You're still alone?

Peterson: We're all together.

McIntosh: You're all together. The whole crew?

Peterson: The whole crew, yup. We were together most of the time. There were times when we did split up into smaller groups, because a group of ten is pretty obvious, but a group of two or three is not so obvious.

McIntosh: Did they give you clothes to wear?

Peterson: I think they did if you needed 'em. We all used coveralls, and we had them on when we jumped, [laughs] had 'em on when we were liberated. If we had anything it would've been a jacket or something for the cool of the evening.

McIntosh: Where did they take you?

Peterson: Well, we were on the move. We didn't stay long in one place, because we were being searched, sought after, see? The French, of course, knew what was going on, and they would inform us, "We have to be moving." And then they were organized into, I guess you and I would call them districts. There'd be one group responsible for a certain area. Okay, when you came to the borderline, you would be turned over, literally turned over to another group, see? And that's the way you progressed, with always someone with you. Then we wondered whether we should try to get to Switzerland, try to enter. We considered it, and we more or less decided we were going to try to make it to Switzerland. They would provide us with a mountain guide and someone else with him, then we would try to get to Switzerland. But it meant crossing some high Alps. After a while, they arrived at the decision that it wouldn't be worth it to try to get in. If you were an experienced mountain climber, that would be one thing. But if you were amateur, like us, that would be another. The fact that the border, Switzerland's, Swiss border, was heavily patrolled also was a factor. People would be able to slip through there once in a while, but somebody was going to get caught, too. So they advised us to abandon that plan, going to Switzerland, and to just hide it out in the high Alps, and so we just stayed put.

McIntosh: In the French Alps?

Peterson: French Alps, yes. We just stayed put. We were very careful in our movements and building fires and things like that, which would give us away. What little food we did have, that was gone, so we were getting very hungry. So we were able to one day catch a mountain sheep [laughs]. We cornered it, and we were able to catch it, and it was butchered. They cut off some of the flesh and we built a little fire at about high noon when the sun was bright, and we cooked some of that mutton. We took some of the tallow from the mutton—from the sheep—and we made the— Like you put in for French fries or something. What do you call that?

McIntosh: You used it to cook in?

Peterson: Yeah, like a cooking oil. We had some stuff to make some biscuits, little biscuits, and so we had a meal of mutton and biscuits, and we made do with that. That was a good thing for us, that we had that.

McIntosh: I bet that tasted pretty good at that point.

Peterson: It did, it did. I was never one fond of mutton, but on that day it went pretty good. Eventually, then, what we had hoped would happen happened, and that is, the south of France was invaded by the 7th Army under General [Alexander “Sandy”] Patch. They moved up to where we were, and so it was a matter of getting in with that Army. And that was near Grenoble.

McIntosh: How did you make contact with them?

Peterson: We had a courier, a young— Actually he was a boy, about sixteen years old, and he would go around, sneak away at night and so forth, and he had ways of getting information to us. He came back with that information, that the 7th Army was coming up our way, and just sit tight and be careful and you will get in with them. And that happened.

McIntosh: How did that happen?

Peterson: The 7th Army had gotten into Grenoble; Grenoble was quite a large city.

McIntosh: I remember it from the Olympics.

Peterson: Yes, right, it was an Olympic spot. So they pushed the German Army back in Grenoble, so they gained that territory and then we followed them into Grenoble.

McIntosh: But how did you make direct contact with these Americans without, you know— Safely?

Peterson: Well, yes, you had to be careful.

McIntosh: They didn’t know who you were.

Peterson: I appreciate that. But I just don’t recall how that—.

McIntosh: Apparently you were able to identify yourselves.

Peterson: Right, yes. We were able to identify ‘em, so that was not a problem. But then, you know— It might happen, and it did happen. The Germans made a counterattack, and so they pushed the Americans out for awhile, and we had to [laughs] go out with them, up the hill. It was just a matter of a couple days, and reinforcements came in and pushed ‘em out of there, where they were no trouble for us to handle. Then we went back in, and then we stayed.

McIntosh: That was a happy day.

Peterson: That was a happy day for us. And then we headed for home, and of course all of the traffic was coming this way with the 7th Army, and so we had to more or less hitchhike [laughs] trucks. We caught on with a supply truck.

McIntosh: Getting a ride wasn't easy probably. All ten of you stayed together?

Peterson: Yup, we were all ten of us together. Then we got down to the south part of France, and we were able to hitch a ride with a British plane over to the island of Corsica. From there, we hitched another ride to Rome and then from there on to Bari, or they pronounced it Ba-ri. That was a large Italian city on the Adriatic [Sea], and that was our headquarters.

McIntosh: Of the 15th?

Peterson: Beg your pardon?

McIntosh: Of the 15th?

Peterson: Of the 15th, yes. So we got in to Bari and our people, and there they put us in a hospital where they gave us a good check-over, and if we had any problem, they could help us with it. I happened to have dysentery, which is a terribly unpleasant thing to have. I remember I was really quite sick, and they gave me treatment.

McIntosh: Probably picked up giardia from drinking that water up in the mountains.

Peterson: Well it could be, but I don't know how I picked it up. It was unpleasant. But we were safe, we were back. We were very detailed interrogation, interrogated, deeply interrogated, then we went back to our base. We were—.

[Long gap in audio].

The war was—in Europe anyway—was over for us. And in the course of time we were sent home. We had a long furlough, I think they gave us a month, and they had a system where they would put people who'd gone through unusual—

McIntosh: Probably got extra points for that.

Peterson: Yeah, right. They sent us to Miami Beach again. There they gave us what they called "R and R," and we could almost write our own ticket for what we wanted to do. If it was golf, you golfed; if it was deep sea fishing, you did that. Movies, anything like that, were all free for you, in a nice hotel, and you ate your meals in the dining room. It was really a nice rest.

McIntosh: There was no talk about going to Japan?

Peterson: Yes, yes there was. There was talk about going to Japan. As a matter of fact, I had volunteered for it, and in the course of time I was told, and all of us were told, that Congress had passed a law stating that airmen (maybe others too) who had been behind enemy lines, evaded capture, and was able to escape, which filled our particular thing, that they would not go overseas again during the present conflict. And so I was reclassified; I went to work in an office fiddling around, you know, waiting, and in the course of time got discharged and came home. But, I want to emphasize at this point, I mentioned before I was very much impressed with the brotherly love of these people. They didn't have to do that, see? They just did that out of brotherly love.

McIntosh: Yeah but you were fighting their enemy.

Peterson: Right.

McIntosh: Their sworn enemy.

Peterson: They were, they kept mentioning this. You know, it was sort of a mutual thing, they were helping us, and we were thanking them and praising them for what they did, and they'd say "No, no, no, you helped liberate us." But even so, even so, some of these men, people, like the farmer who came out of his field to me, he didn't have to do that.

McIntosh: Did you keep in contact with any of those people?

Peterson: Yes, that's another long story. We kept in touch with some of these people, and we had exchange visits with them. We had a group that came to our country and we met with them. I had one of them. A lot of interesting people that we met, and some of the interesting men we met were doctors, something that you would be interested in hearing a little bit about. French Underground had a hospital for their wounded, and of course they had a staff of doctors and helpers, you see. So, the time came when this hospital came under attack. It was sort of a makeshift thing; everything was makeshift then. It was coming under attack and had to be evacuated. Prior to this attack, another hospital in the southern part of this area had been attacked and annihilated. Everybody killed, everybody.

McIntosh: That's the German way.

Peterson: That's the German way, you bet. No mercy. So this was another hospital up in our area, and it was at a place called Alpe d'Huez, which you could identify with Vale or Aspen. It was a resort, skiing resort, high in the Alps.

There was this hospital in what we would call a motel, and the wounded were kept there in these hospitals, or these rooms, looked like motel rooms. And they moved us in there with them, so we had a decent place. We had a bed to sleep in; we had a dining room to go to and have a couple of meals a day. Very simple food, but it sustained us and then some. And so we were all hiding out there, and one night, during the night, we were tipped off that the Germans were going to attack, and so out we went. And at that point we offered our services to the hospital, to help carry stretchers, people, lead 'em if that's what they needed. So we became part of the Underground, which changed our status, you know?

McIntosh: Of course.

Peterson: But we just couldn't do otherwise. Natural thing to do. So we stayed with them and we helped them. We were a part of the organization, and one of the doctors of this hospital somehow or other had gotten caught. He was scheduled for the firing squad, and he was shot to death because he refused to give any information. He lost his life rather than— And in the city of Grenoble, a large city, 3-400,000, we added a wing. This is after the war; they added a wing to a hospital in honor of him. I'm trying to think of his name, and I just— Farget [?] was his last name. He was a young doctor.

Then the head of the hospital was a doctor, an older man. And he had left his practice, good practice, to leave it all to go and join the Underground. His wife was with him. She was, I think you would call it anesthesiologist, and he did the surgeries, she did the— They were with us, but she was pregnant, and we were high in the mountains. See when we were hiding out there, they were with us. The time came when she was due to deliver this child, and so they sent one of the young French men—actually boys, fifteen, sixteen years old—to accompany her down to a village where there was a hospital so she could have this baby. She got down there and they wouldn't take her in, because they were afraid, if the enemy found out that they were doing that, they would be in big trouble. So she got out on the road, and she hitchhiked a ride into a larger place, to a hospital where they would take her. She had a little baby girl, and all was well. I remember the fellows on the crew, they were making bets [laughs] whether it was a boy or a girl. Then, in nineteen— Let's see, I'm trying to remember that date now. We all went back, the whole crew went back, and our families came with us.

McIntosh: To Grenoble?

Peterson: My wife and five children were with me. I'll add thanks to a generous grandmother who financed the children, you know, expensive deal. But I wanted them to be a part of that. And this baby girl that had been born

about forty-some years earlier, she was with us, and she was a— She and her husband were guides in the mountains, and we were visiting with her and telling her what we were doing when she was born. We thought it was so great that she was doing what she was doing, and she said to us, “Don’t talk about that, I want to talk about what you did for us.” It was the gratitude they had for the Americans. When those American Liberators and the '17s—although I’m partial to the '24s—when they flew overhead, that gave them hope. They knew we were allies every which way. But she said, this girl said, “When you were here the first time, I was with you. I was in the womb [laughs]. And now, you’re with us.”

McIntosh: They came over to the United States another time?

Peterson: Yes, we had at least two or three reunions. I think one of the unique things about our story is the fact that we followed up after the war, **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** and these people are friends of ours. I had one, who’s a business man now, and came to our country on a business trip, and he took a swing through Madison, called me up and said, “I’m going to come and spend a couple days with you.” I was thrilled. He came and he stayed with us in our home, and I took him to Madison and showed him all around, wanted him to meet people in the Capitol because as a business man, he was a part of the government, too. He was on a— What do you call those? Cabinet members. He was in charge of the industry department, and he would have to travel and make contacts around the world. I wanted to hook him up with someone similar in our government so that they could meet.

McIntosh: Did your airplane crew all get decorated?

Peterson: Yes, we were.

McIntosh: What did you win?

Peterson: Well, uh, I received a Distinguished Flying Cross.

McIntosh: Everybody got those?

Peterson: I’m not sure, I’m not sure. We didn’t get it as a group. I got one as an individual for some individual thing. And then I got the Air Medal. That was for flying combat missions.

McIntosh: Right, unit citation everyone sort of automatically—.

Peterson: Unit citation from the President, we had several of those. Then we have French medals.

McIntosh: When did those get to you? How far after the war?

Peterson: One of them was just recent. It came to us in this way. The whole crew was given this particular honor, and that was for our joining with them, back in the hospital.

McIntosh: What was that medal called? Do you recall?

Peterson: Legion of Honor.

McIntosh: I interviewed a gentleman from northern Wisconsin who was in World War I. The French awarded all these World War I fellows with the same medal.

Peterson: Right. Now, I have to qualify that by saying that you give a crew of ten men a medal, only one is going to receive the actual medal. You follow me?

McIntosh: I'm trying to.

Peterson: In other words, we didn't get ten Legions of Honor. The crew got it, but only one has possession, and that was our Captain, naturally.

McIntosh: But you all got ribbons.

Peterson: Well I never got any ribbon, but I got a notice, official notice, that as a part of the crew I had been, I had received— .

McIntosh: It's a pretty medal, I've seen it on the fellow up in Barron, Wisconsin. They gave him one, and he's almost 100.

Peterson: My goodness.

McIntosh: He sits in a nursing home all day.

Peterson: And we got other things from the French government, recognitions, because they appreciated the fact that we joined with them to help, even though it was the natural thing to do. But I think the unique thing about our relationship was that we made this sort of a lifelong thing. It didn't end; it keeps going and going, I think that's unique.

McIntosh: That's amazing, very unique.

Peterson: I've been back there several times, once with my whole family as I told you. And another thing, I have a picture that—.

McIntosh: What am I looking at?

Peterson: You're looking at a monument right near our plane crash in France. And we were joined together with an association. We were the American part and they were the French, and we contributed money to this organization so that some of these things could be done. We had two projects that we worked on. One of them was a hut that we reconstructed. It was a dilapidated old thing high in the mountains. When we were moving this Underground hospital up the mountain, we put our wounded in this hut so that they would have a roof over their heads. After the war then, together, we rebuilt this hut almost from the foundation up. My two sons went back one summer to work together with the French workers in a joint effort to rebuild this. There's a plaque on it, the thing is open for anyone. We put the wounded in there; today anyone who wants to go in there to spend the night, to sleep, and probably cook a meal, they can do so. There's a plaque, one in French, which explains what it's all about, and we Americans have our own plaque, similar. And then the other one is this one [refers back to picture]. That's the whole group there; that was at the dedication. This was at the dedication. And that is one of our propellers from our plane—the center piece there—and a shepherd, mountain shepherd, had gone through the rubble of our plane and retrieved this propeller and stuck it in the ground in front of this hut, and he gave that back to us. And so we—.

McIntosh: Made a memorial out of it.

Peterson: Yes. We got an architect to design a monument, and this is right alongside of the road, right in back of those trees there. That's where our plane crashed. And so this monument marks the place where that American crew crashed in that spot, and they widened the road so that someone driving could pull off and read the inscription. Part of it's in English, you don't see that. But we were there for that dedication.

McIntosh: Oh, that's wonderful.

Peterson: That's my son, one of my sons [refers to photograph]. And then this is the whole ceremony with the kind of things the French like. They like a lot of pageantry, no they do, and that's alright. I find no fault with that. I told you that another unique thing about our—I think anyway—is the fact that, of all the crews that were shot down over in France, all over Europe, and escaped, evaded capture and escaped with the help of the French, that we were able to get publicity that I don't know if others got. But I mentioned to you before the *Reader's Digest* that has a— In September of 1984 *Reader's Digest*, we were interviewed by a reporter.

McIntosh: This is your crew [looking at *Reader's Digest*]?

Peterson: This is our crew, yes. And that's our plane, well I don't know if it's our plane but— And then to give it a little international flavor—.

McIntosh: That's the French version?

Peterson: No, that's Norwegian.

McIntosh: Oh, it's Norwegian.

Peterson: The editor of the British *Reader's Digest* had received this, and going over the list of the names, he spotted one guy that he thought might be a Norwegian.

McIntosh: [Laughs] Peterson, right? [Both laugh] That was easy.

Peterson: So he contacted me, and he wanted to interview me for the Norwegian edition. And he wrote a little article there, and he titled it "From the Bomber to the Pope [?]"

McIntosh: That's wonderful.

Peterson: So, that's the international flavor.

McIntosh: Now I've got some questions. What did you do after the service?

Peterson: After the service?

McIntosh: Use your G.I. Bill?

Peterson: Yes, I did, to its full extent. I was in a hurry. I knew I wanted to continue my education, and so I went into college right away. Within two weeks I was in the classroom. I had a brother who lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I was separated down at Sparta, Camp McCoy, and I went up to spend a couple days with him. While I was there, he said to me "What are you going to do now?" I said, "I'm going to go to school." "Where you going to school?" I said, [laughs], "I'm saying, just the help, that just got out." He said, "Well I'll tell ya—"

He was a single fellow at the time and he was already a pastor. So he had a home but he wasn't married at the time. He said, "You live with me. We've got a college downtown here, why don't you go down and talk to them, go to school, go here, live with me?" So I went down and talked to them, and they were willing to accept me as a student. As a matter of fact, little bit of a novelty to have one of the first GIs back home. So, I was just sort of in general, I hadn't thought of any particular, one particular thing.

I was just kind of feeling my way. Somewhere along the line, I was doing some serious thinking about what had happened to me, and uh, I couldn't help but believe that the Lord's hands were involved in it, and the thought that maybe I should devote my life—.

McIntosh: To pay back?

Peterson: To the Lord's work. I don't call it that, I've had others suggest that, too. I didn't look at it in that way, rather in this way: What's the best thing I can do in my life? To serve my Lord, and others. And mulling that around in my mind, as to what was the best way I could do that, I came to the conclusion that I would go into the ministry. And so, that's where I went, and graduated from seminary, and I've been a pastor then, ever since.

McIntosh: Where?

Peterson: Oh, up and around in different places.

McIntosh: All around the Midwest?

Peterson: Most. I was in Colorado, Colorado Springs, and otherwise it's been Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin. I've been here. I was at Oregon [Wisconsin]; I came to Oregon first, then I retired from there, and my oldest son was the head pastor at Holy Cross on the east side [of Madison]. I wasn't real happy with my retirement; I guess I wasn't prepared for it. So I called him up one day and invited him to have lunch with me, down at the restaurant. He said to me, "What you got on your mind, Dad?" I said, "Well, I'm looking for a job." [Laughs] And he said, "I'll put you to work." And then he gave a little caveat, saying that he would have to go the Board and have this all approved, set up for me. But he said, "They know that I need help," and he said, "If you could help out with the visitation, that would be a big relief."

McIntosh: Take some pressure off him?

Peterson: Yeah, it's quite a large congregation so they have a lot of shut-ins, we call 'em.

McIntosh: Those of us of our age?

Peterson: And above, yeah.

McIntosh: Not many of those. [Both laugh]

Peterson: Well, there's probably more than you think. So we have, oh, between seventy and eighty.

McIntosh: People you visit?

Peterson: Yes, in that category. The church wants these people to be served. They were faithful members during the years, and the church should be faithful to them. And so that's what I'm doing. This summer I'm going to attend two reunions. Both of them have to do with military. I'm a member of an organization called the Air Force Evade and Escape Society [Air Forces Escape and Evasion Society].

McIntosh: Oh, my. I haven't heard of that one.

Peterson: You haven't heard of that one? Okay. That brings together people like me who were helped by someone. That farmer that came out of his field to hide me in the woods, and risked his life doing it. These things were happening all over—Holland, Belgium, Germany, and France—yes, even Germany. People would take in an American flier and hide him in their cellar or in the attic. And they bring together these people who were helped and their helpers. Now my helper, he's dead and gone. I did see him in 1985, when I visited over there, and we retraced our steps. I found the place where I parachuted, and where this man came to help me. So this is an interesting group of people. They've got to be, to do what they did. Put their lives on the line to save another human being they never saw before and didn't know. That's something, I can't get over that. I'm going to go and meet with these people, and then my own bomb group that I flew with is having a reunion in September, and that's another one I'm going to.

McIntosh: How many are left?

Peterson: On my crew? There are eight of us that are still living, two have passed away. But we're all up there, you know.

McIntosh: It's amazing how long you've stayed together, through everything.

Peterson: Right, right.

McIntosh: Not only on the airplane, but also with your captain, when you were down and stayed together then, and afterwards you're still together. All that's quite unusual, because a lot of people I've interviewed have said, "Well, and after the war, I don't know where anybody is." And some do, and some don't. Different circumstances.

Peterson: We were closer than brothers. Right.

McIntosh: But I think a lot of guys are very close, in the service, but somehow--.

Peterson: They drift apart.

McIntosh: They drift apart.

Peterson: Easy to do.

McIntosh: Oh, I think so, because you have no real interest to share anymore—.

Peterson: Only the war.

McIntosh: Right, you had an experience, and after awhile, that—.

Peterson: Yeah, that wears off. But you're able to get together with them, in a social sense. Why, they were closer than brothers to you, when you were going through it. You never forget 'em. Never forget 'em.

McIntosh: Okay, that'll do it here.

Peterson: Okay.

McIntosh: Now, one thing. [long pause] Where do you live now?

Peterson: I live on the west side.

McIntosh: Street?

Peterson: 841 North Gammon.

McIntosh: You live near me.

Peterson: Oh, is that right?

McIntosh: Yeah, I live in Hidden Hollow, that little, just off Gammon there, behind the Alzheimer's home.

Peterson: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I know where that is.

McIntosh: That's Middleton or Madison?

Peterson: It's Madison, although it's close to Middleton. I can throw a rock and hit it.

McIntosh: Right. Well that Alzheimer's home is in Middleton and that's right there, so we're on the last edge of Madison. So that's 53717 then, right?

Peterson: Yes, 717.

McIntosh: Okay now, the other thing is that I wanted to, let's see here—[long pause].
Is it alright if I copy this?

Peterson: Sure.

McIntosh: Because I can put it in the copier and do it, and it takes just a second.

Peterson: That'll give you a lot of information.

[End of Interview]