

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
JOHN W. PHILIPPS  
Aerial Gunner and Mechanic, Army Air Forces, World War II.

2000

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**Philipps, John W.**, (1914-2006). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 30 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

John W. Philipps, a Lancaster, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as an Air Force mechanic and gunner with the 453rd Bomb Group. Philipps mentions basic training at Jefferson Barracks (Missouri) and airplane mechanic school in Illinois. He talks about the kinds of airplanes he worked with at mechanic training at Hamilton Field (California), aerial gunnery school at Las Vegas (Nevada), and assignment to a B-24 crew at March Field (California). Philipps comments on his long flight to RAF Old Buckenham Airfield (England), problems caused by bad weather during missions into occupied France and Germany, opposition from anti-aircraft and enemy fighter planes, and shrapnel damage. He addresses food, flight equipment, taking shelter from the Blitz while on leave in London, and going to Edinburgh on leave. Philipps tells of having an engine shot out during a mission to bomb an oil refinery in Politz (Germany). He touches upon working as a classroom instructor in Ireland, being shipped back to the United States in 1944, and getting married before transferring to Truax Field (Madison), where he worked in a supply room. After being discharged, Philipps mentions becoming a member of the VFW and the American Legion, and he talks about his civilian career.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Philipps (1914-2006) entered the Army Air Forces in 1942. He flew thirty-two missions and was honorably discharged at the rank of staff sergeant. After the war, he worked in the hardware and appliance business for many years in Lancaster (Wisconsin), for the Department of Agriculture in their Trade Regulations Division as a civil investigator in Eau Claire, retired to Arkansas and Florida, and eventually settled in Middleton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed by Katy Marty, 2008

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

**Transcribed Interview:**

- Jim: All right, it's the 29<sup>th</sup> of June, the year 2000. We're speaking to John Philipps. You were born when, John?
- Philipps: September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1914.
- Jim: And where was that?
- Philipps: It was in Lancaster, Wisconsin.
- Jim: And you entered military service in March of '42?
- Philipps: Right, that's correct, yes.
- Jim: And they sent you first where?
- Philipps: At Fort Sheridan. I was inducted at Fort Sheridan, then I was sent to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri for basic training.
- Jim: You got eight weeks or twelve weeks?
- Philipps: Oh, that was only about four or six weeks.
- Jim: I see. And then did they teach you a particular skill?
- Philipps: Not in basic training, no.
- Jim: All right.
- Philipps: From there I went back to Chicago and went to Air Force mechanic school, airplane mechanic school.
- Jim: I see. Was that a long schooling?
- Philipps: That was ah, four or five months during that summer, yes.
- Jim: That must have been highly technical then.
- Philipps: Well, there was a lot of instruction, yes.
- Jim: I'll bet. Was it hard to learn that stuff?
- Philipps: Well, it took a little concentration, but it was pretty basic.
- Jim: I see. And now that you had this skill, what did they do with it?

Philipps: Well then they sent me, after I finished that school they sent me to—

Jim: California?

Philipps: California, to an airbase just north of San Francisco; Hamilton Field it's called.

Jim: I see. And did you join a group then?

Philipps: Yes, I was assigned to one of the squadrons there. There were three different squadrons working on the airplanes that were coming through there.

Jim: You have listed here the 453<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group.

Philipps: That was later.

Jim: That was later? At first you were with—

Philipps: I can't remember the name of it; it was—

Jim: Heavy bombers or—?

Philipps: No, this had to do with mechanical work on all types of airplanes that were coming through heading for the South Pacific.

Jim: Was your job primarily up in the engines or was it—?

Philipps: Engines basically, yes.

Jim: And was it just the big airplanes or did you do the smaller ones, too?

Philipps: No, there were not many small planes coming through there because the next stop they could make was in Hawaii. They had to be—

Jim: I see; they were all four engine bombers?

Philipps: Mostly four engine bombers, yeah.

Jim: Both 17s and 24s?

Philipps: Yes, and some two engine bombers.

Jim: 25s and 26s?

Philipps: B-25s and 26s.

Jim: Right. Were they hard to repair, the job you were at?

Philipps: No, not necessarily; most of the work was fairly routine.

Jim: Routine?

Philipps: Yeah, you'd run into a problem once in a while and you may have to get some help from somebody more knowledgeable than you were.

Jim: Sure. And you were close to San Francisco there?

Philipps: Yes, it's only about twenty miles north of San Francisco.

Jim: All right. Did you have to stand guard duty too, or not?

Philipps: No, no. Our work was strictly working on the airplanes. They had other people there that did that type of work.

Jim: Did you live in a barracks?

Philipps: Yeah, we were in a big permanent barracks there.

Jim: I see. How long did you stay there?

Philipps: I was there until, until the following spring when I signed up to go to Air Force gunnery school up at Las Vegas, Nevada.

Jim: So that would be in the spring of '43?

Philipps: Spring of '43, yes.

Jim: So how was that? That was a little more exciting, I'll bet.

Philipps: Well, that was a little more interesting. We did a lot of air to air shooting with machine guns from a plane, one plane and then shooting at a tow target pulled by another plane.

Jim: Was that hard to learn, to hit those things?

Philipps: Well, it took a little doing, yes.

Jim: Sure, a little practice.

Philipps: Yup.

- Jim: Did they shoot you duty wing shooting with shotguns and [unintelligible]?
- Philipps: We did a lot of trapping with [unintelligible].
- Jim: Yeah. You learn how to lead. Okay. And after you finished with gunnery school, you were a Staff Sergeant?
- Philipps: Yes.
- Jim: Where did they send you?
- Philipps: I was sent to—I went up to a base in Utah for two or three weeks until I was assigned to a bomb group. I was assigned then to the 453<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group which was in their third and final phase of training at March Field in California.
- Jim: I see. And they were flying 24s or 17s?
- Philipps: This was 24s; we had 24s.
- Jim: And how long before you went overseas with that group?
- Philipps: Well, we finished up our training the first part of December and we went up—oddly enough, we went back up to Hamilton Field where I had been to pick up our new planes, our new B-24s, and then we left from there to go to England.
- Jim: I see. Whereabouts in England did you land? At a base?
- Philipps: We landed at an Air Force base called Old Buckenham; it was northeast of London.
- Jim: You got there about what, the end of '43 or early '44?
- Philipps: Oh, we got—that was a long trip. We, as I said, we left Hamilton Field about December 10<sup>th</sup> and didn't get—we came back across the country, of course, and then down to cross the Gulf of Mexico and down to South America and then on down through South America to Brazil and then from Brazil over to Africa, Africa up to North Africa and then from there to England. So it took us about a month and a half.
- Jim: Wow, that was a long trip!
- Philipps: Yeah.

Jim: How many in your crew? Ten?

Jim: Ten on a crew, yes. Were you a waist gunner or a—

Philipps: I was a tail turret gunner. Tail turrets on a B-24.

Jim: You had to squeeze into a tight area?

Philipps: Well, there wasn't much room in there, that's for sure.

Jim: Did you sit in there or could you stand?

Philipps: You sat in there.

Jim: Right. Pretty cramped quarters.

Philipps: Yeah, but there was room for a man, if you weren't too big. I was a hundred and fifty, sixty pounds.

Jim: Okay, so when you got to Europe, do you recall when that was?

Philipps: It was about the middle or later part of January. Can I refer to some notes that I have?

Jim: Whatever, of course.

Philipps: [pause] We left Hamilton Field on December 11<sup>th</sup> and we arrived at Valley, Wales, which is a big air base in Wales, on January 14<sup>th</sup>.

Jim: Of 1944?

Philipps: 1944, yes. So that was, they told us it was thirteen thousand miles that we had traveled and we'd been on four continents.

Jim: Wow. All right, and when did you start your first mission?

Philipps: Our first mission started, our group became operational in the first part of February and we did—our particular crew got in two missions in February was all. The weather was very bad during the month of February.

Jim: Do you recall where the missions were?

Philipps: No, I don't have an exact record of that. They were in Germany basically, Germany or northern France, occupied France.

Jim: Did you meet any opposition?

- Philipps: Oh yes, there was always opposition. There was antiaircraft firing from the ground and also German fighter planes at times.
- Jim: Did you have the chance to shoot at any of the German fighter planes?
- Philipps: Oh yeah, you had plenty of chances to shoot. You never knew if you hit 'em or not, because there were so many of you shooting at 'em, so many gunners.
- Jim: You generally flew in formation?
- Philipps: We were in pretty tight formation, yes.
- Jim: So if a fighter was hit, it could be any one or several?
- Philipps: Yeah. If you got credit for a fighter it was usually because you were out of formation for some reason, you'd had an engine knocked out or had some other problem with your plane that couldn't keep you in formation.
- Jim: Did the plane suffer much damage on these missions?
- Philipps: Oh, there was usually some certain amount of damage, mainly from antiaircraft fire from the ground.
- Jim: Was that a bigger concern than the German airplanes?
- Philipps: Well, I think there was more of it, let's put it that way. I don't know if it was a main concern, one over the other, but there was more of it.
- Jim: Did any of that put holes in your plane or the other aircraft?
- Philipps: Oh, yes, there usually were holes in the plane.
- Jim: From the exploding shells?
- Philipps: Yes. Shrapnel, as they call it.
- Jim: Yes. But did you ever get hit?
- Philipps: I never got hit personally. The only man on our plane that ever got hit was our navigator. He got hit with a piece of shrapnel one day.
- Jim: Did he make it?
- Philipps: Oh yeah, he made it. He was not seriously hurt.



- Jim: That was lucky.
- Philipps: Yup.
- Jim: How many missions did you have, John?
- Philipps: We flew thirty-two.
- Jim: Thirty-two?
- Philipps: Yup. See, the tour was twenty-five missions when we started and then they increased it to thirty and then to thirty-five, but then at that time they put in a cutoff period that each crew had, depending on how many missions you had at that time, how many you had to do, and ours was set at thirty-two.
- Jim: Well, you're fortunate that you finished it safely.
- Philipps: Right, right.
- Jim: You must have had a good pilot and a good crew.
- Philipps: Yeah, we did. A very good pilot.
- Jim: Have you kept in contact with those folks?
- Philipps: Just with a couple, three of them. One of the other gunners was from Arkansas and I've seen him several times. I saw the navigator a couple of times when I was living in Florida, and I guess that's the only two from our crew that I've seen. I've seen three of four of the members of the crew that lived with us in the same hut over there while we were flying.
- Jim: Right. To go back to that, how was food at your base in England?
- Philipps: Well, [laughs] ah, it wasn't the most enjoyable, but we survived on it.
- Jim: Did you eat any local food or was it all the stuff that the Air Force brought in?
- Philipps: Well, it was all what the Air Force brought in, except what you would get when you were on a three day leave or a seven day leave, which you got once in a while.
- Jim: When you got this leave time, where did you generally go?

Philipps: Well, we'd usually go to London. A couple of times I went from London up to Edinburgh, Scotland, which was a little more enjoyable place to be. The food was better and the conditions were better and there was never any bombs being dropped there.

Jim: Right, that made it nicer.

Philipps: Yeah.

Jim: Did you ever get into a blitz when you were in London?

Philipps: Oh yeah. We saw some bombs dropped there.

Jim: Did you head for the tube?

Philipps: For the tube or a bomb shelter.

Jim: Right. There were a lot of American boys there in London at that time.

Philipps: Oh yes, yes.

Jim: Did you go to the USO club there?

Philipps: No, I never spent too much time in the USO club. We, well we visited a few pubs, of course.

Jim: Sure. Did they treat you well?

Philipps: Yeah, pretty well.

Jim: Did you go to any dances at all and meet some British girls?

Philipps: Yeah, we went to a big dance hall a couple of times, a few times and also up in Edinburgh we used to go to a big dance hall.

Jim: Right, did you meet some nice girls there?

Philipps: Yeah, there were a lot of nice girls.

Jim: Did you write to any them after you got out of the service?

Philipps: No, I got married right after I got home so I-

Jim: Well, there'd be no more writing then. [laughs]

Philipps: No, no.

- Jim: But you got mail on a regular basis; that was no problem?
- Philipps: Oh yes, yeah. The mail was very good.
- Jim: Tell me about any of the special missions that you went on that were more difficult than others.
- Philipps: Well, the one that I remember was to an oil refinery up in the northern, way northern part of Germany. Politz was the name of the city, I believe. There was a big oil refinery there and we bombed that. We also got one engine shot out on that mission and had to come home on three engines, which was quite a distance. It was probably two hundred-fifty to three hundred miles over the North Sea from where we were to get home, but we made it.
- Jim: Plane damaged very badly?
- Philipps: Well, that was the worst damage we had, when we had that one engine shot out.
- Jim: And did you have any trouble with your ammunition? Did that always work?
- Philipps: It always worked, never had a gun failure, no. Ammunition and the gun worked good.
- Jim: How about staying warm? How'd they dress you for staying warm?
- Philipps: Well, to start with we just had heavy jackets and trousers to put on over our regular clothes, but eventually we got heated suits to put on which were a lot more comfortable as long as they didn't burn out or you'd lose arm blood circulation or your leg or something. Basically they worked pretty good.
- Jim: Did you use heavy gloves when you—
- Philipps: Oh yes, heavy gloves. Ya know, it was thirty, forty, fifty below zero up there.
- Jim: Right. It made it difficult to operate that gun with those heavy gloves on, did it?
- Philipps: Well, no. You can—I never recall having any problem with that.
- Jim: Did you have to worry about reloading or any of that?

Philipps: No, the loading was all automatic. Your ammunition was piled in ammunition boxes that were out in the back end of the airplane, just outside of the turret, and they fed automatically into the gun.

Jim: Automatic fill?

Philipps: Oh yeah.

Jim: You didn't have to move, then, from the time you took off until the time you got back?

Philipps: No. You sat there and that's all you did.

Jim: How about eating at the long voyage?

Philipps: No, nothing.

Jim: Nothing? Did you take any candy bars?

Philipps: Well, once in a while if you happened to have one. Normally we didn't take anything to eat.

Jim: How about cigarettes?

Philipps: Cigarettes I took.

Jim: Did you smoke them?

Philipps: Oh yes, yeah.

Jim: How would you smoke cigarettes if you had those heavy gloves on?

Philipps: Well, you couldn't, you couldn't, because you couldn't smoke until you got back down where you weren't using the oxygen anymore.

Jim: Oh, that's true, yeah.

Philipps: If you smoked while using oxygen you'd have a—

Jim: Well, otherwise the cigarette, you'd would take about two puffs and be gone.

Philipps: Yeah.

Jim: You'd burn up pretty fast. So none of the guys moved around really a lot in the aircraft?

- Philipps: Not a lot. No, the waist gunners were on their feet because we had two gunners in the waist; they had a gun on each side.
- Jim: Right.
- Philipps: And, of course, up on the flight deck there was a little bit of moving around by the engineer and the radio operator and the navigator, bombardier.
- Jim: But that plane was a little bit bigger than the B-17?
- Philipps: Yes, they were bigger and, as I said, there was a real turret on the back of those. The B-17s just had a couple of guns and you had to crawl in to operate those.
- Jim: That's more difficult, I think.
- Philipps: Yeah.
- Jim: You never flew in one of those?
- Philipps: No, I never did fly in a B-17. Never was inside of one.
- Jim: If you go up to the EAA in Oshkosh, they fly one or two in every year.
- Philipps: Yup. I've never been up to that.
- Jim: Oh, you'd enjoy that.
- Philipps: Yeah, I suppose, yeah.
- Jim: So after your missions, they sent you back home right away or—
- Philipps: No. Actually I was sent over to Ireland as an instructor in a school where replacement crews were coming through that were flying the northern route. They'd fly into Ireland, go to our school, and then be assigned to a bomb group.
- Jim: I see. You were instructing them in gunnery?
- Philipps: Well, there was no flying connected with it; it was all classroom work.
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Philipps: What to expect and what they would be getting into.
- Jim: After the war or just—

- Philipps: Oh no, the war was still on; this was—
- Jim: You'd finished your thirty-two missions then—
- Philipps: Oh yeah, long before the war was over. I finished shortly after the invasion, shortly after D-Day.
- Jim: '44?
- Philipps: Yeah, '44. It was early in the summer of '44.
- Jim: Nine months of war left.
- Philipps: Yeah, yeah. I was up there; they closed that school. It looked like the war was kind of winding down in the fall and they closed the school and we were—us instructors were moved back to England, where we stayed for another couple of months before we were sent home. That was—still the Battle of the Bulge had not started at that time. It started, in fact, when we were on the ship coming home.
- Jim: So when you got back to the States, what did they do with you?
- Philipps: Then I was sent to—
- Jim: You must of got some leave time.
- Philipps: I got a thirty day leave to begin with and I went back to Lancaster, where my folks still lived at that time, and spent the leave there and then was sent to Santa Ana, California, which is a base just out of Los Angeles. That's where my present wife was living, in Los Angeles, at that time, so we got married then. After I was finished with examinations and physicals and stuff in Santa Ana, I was sent back here to Truax Field, where I spent the rest of the war.
- Jim: Oh my, instructing again?
- Philipps: No, I was not doing much of anything, actually. I was assigned to a squadron out there and worked in the supply room and wherever was necessary.
- Jim: What was your rank by that time?
- Philipps: My rank was still Staff Sergeant. That was the end of it.
- Jim: Did your air group win any metals?

- Philipps: Oh, we all won metals. Yeah. You won them individually. I won the Distinguished Flying Cross, the air medal with the three oak leaf clusters and the European, what did they call it?, the European Theater Ribbon with the three bronze stars.
- Jim: Oh, on the ribbon?
- Philipps: Yeah.
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Philipps: That's in addition to the ribbon.
- Jim: That's for the additional time and represents a few months more.
- Philipps: Yeah.
- Jim: Yeah, but that wasn't the Bronze Star, the original medal?
- Philipps: No, oh no. No, that was Bronze Star to go in addition to the ribbon. Those are different.
- Jim: The Service Cross was for a particular mission or—
- Philipps: No, just for completing the tour.
- Jim: Thirty-two missions.
- Philipps: And the Air medal and the oak leaf clusters to that was for each five missions, I believe.
- Jim: Do you think that your training was adequate for what they asked you to do?
- Philipps: Oh yes, I think so.
- Jim: So you never really had any time or any experience where you felt that you might not make it except for that one time when the engine was out?
- Philipps: Well, [laughs] yeah. Each mission was kind of questionable as far as that's concerned, because you were continually seeing planes shot down on every mission, practically every mission. Some of them were a little easier. When the invasion took place, I guess the Germans were too busy to bother with us up twelve-, fifteen thousand feet in the air, which was what we flew during the invasion missions, so we had no particular problems and very little antiaircraft fire.

- Jim: At the end of the tour?
- Philipps: The invasion, the day they invaded—we flew two missions, one the day of the invasion and one the next day, and then we flew two more missions a week or two or three later in support of the invasion, bombing railroad bridges and so forth.
- Jim: Generally how much time did you have between missions?
- Philipps: Well, a lot of it depended on the weather. A couple of different times, according to my notes that I kept, we flew four missions on four consecutive days. [phone rings; pause]
- Jim: Okay, I forgot where we were. Sorry about that.
- Philipps: So did I. Oh, we were talking about being back. I was back here at Truax Field.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Philipps: Just waiting to be discharged.
- Jim: What did you do after you left the service?
- Philipps: Well after I left service, my wife and I moved to Lancaster and I was in the hardware and appliance business there for eighteen or twenty years.
- Jim: Oh my. Did you join any veterans' organizations?
- Philipps: Oh, yeah. I joined the VFW and the Legion.
- Jim: Are you still active in those groups?
- Philipps: Well, I still belong; I still keep up my membership. I'm not active, let's put it that way.
- Jim: I never joined the Legion, I joined the VFW. I was just not into the Legion, at all.
- Philipps: Well, I thought they deserved my support, so I joined and pay my dues every year.
- Jim: The VFW keeps sending me letters every other week, it seems, for contributions.
- Philipps: Yeah.



- Jim: They really work hard at that.
- Philipps: Yup.
- Jim: Did you use your G.I. Bill at all?
- Philipps: No I didn't.
- Jim: So after you retired from you business—
- Philipps: Well, I worked for the State then for eighteen or nineteen years, after I sold out my interest in the hardware and appliance store. I worked for the Department of Agriculture in their Trade Regulations Division as a civil investigator.
- Jim: Where did you live then?
- Philipps: We lived in Eau Claire.
- Jim: Oh, you moved around again.
- Philipps: Yeah.
- Jim: Then, when you retired from that?
- Philipps: We retired from that and we moved to, lived in Arkansas for five years and then moved to Florida and lived there for fifteen years.
- Jim: How were all those retirement places?
- Philipps: Well, those were good. I enjoyed Arkansas very much and I also enjoyed Florida. Arkansas probably a little more so, because I was younger then and more active and more interested in fishing and hunting and playing golf, and those kind of things, than I was in the later part of the time in Florida. Although I did play a lot of golf in Florida.
- Jim: How did you get back to Madison?
- Philipps: Well, after my wife got sick, we were not satisfied with the care that she was getting in the nursing home she was in in Florida. I wasn't satisfied with it and neither were my daughters, so we, they looked into the situation here and we decided we'd be better off to come back here and made arrangements for us to get into the old, original Attic Angel place, to get my wife into the nursing section and me into the apartment towers.
- Jim: Has that worked out pretty well?

- Philipps: Yes.
- Jim: Beautiful place.
- Philipps: Yeah, this is very nice.
- Jim: This unit, do you rent this from the Attic Angels? On a rental basis?
- Philipps: Yeah, and I also get one meal a day, my main meal in the evening.
- Jim: That's included with the rent?
- Philipps: Yes, it's all part of the package.
- Jim: You don't have to cook if you don't wish to?
- Philipps: No, just get a little breakfast and a little lunch.
- Jim: Is this sort of a standard unit here?
- Philipps: Well, a lot of them are just one bedroom; I happen to have a two bedroom. I really didn't need that, but they didn't have any more one bedrooms.
- Jim: So they're one and two bedroom units?
- Philipps: Yes. And on each floor there's one that has an extra room or two.
- Jim: I see. So that gives you two bedrooms and a kitchen and a living room. That's pretty nice.
- Philipps: Yeah.
- Jim: Seems like a lot of room for you.
- Philipps: Very adequate, yeah.
- Jim: All right. Well, I can't think of anything else to ask you. Is there anything you forgot to tell me?
- Philipps: I think we covered the whole thing. Just for fun, a month or two ago I got out my notes and sat down and wrote what I had, the places I'd been and the length of time I had been there and so forth and so on for my own use.
- Jim: Sure, we appreciate it. Okay, thank you very much.
- Philipps: You bet. **[End of interview]**