

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MELLO STAPLETON
Radioman, Army Air Corps, World War II.
Instructor, Air Force, Career.

2000

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Stapleton, Mello, [1919-2006]. Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette [ca. 86 min.], analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette [ca. 86 min.], analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording [ca. 86 min.]; ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. [1 folder].

Abstract:

Mello "Mel" Stapleton, a North Lake, Wisconsin native, discusses his career in the Air Force and his World War II service as a member of the Army Air Corps. He was stationed at Hickam Field [Hawaii] during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Stapleton talks about enlisting in the Air Corps because his family had no money for college, receiving a letter from General "Hap" Armstrong permitting him to serve despite his poor eyesight, training at Chanute Field [Illinois], attending radio school, and serving as an instructor until he had a "falling out" with the first sergeant. Transferred to the 50th Reconnaissance Squad at Hickam Field in 1940, he provides a detailed account of the Pearl Harbor attack. He remembers seeing a headline in *Collier's Magazine* that day stating, "Pearl Harbor is impregnable." He describes hearing an explosion while walking to breakfast, looking outside, seeing Japanese aircraft flying toward the airfield, running toward airplanes to get machine guns, and running to the armory for additional weapons. Stapleton recalls being knocked down by a bomb blast that killed his friend, taking cover in a bomb crater, and being wounded by shrapnel. He mentions being taken to an airplane hanger with the other wounded and the high number of casualties caused by the strafing. He talks about having to scrounge for food because the cooks had been killed and being sent out the day after the attack in an old B-18 to search for the Japanese fleet. Transferred to the 431st Bomb Squadron as a radio operator in the Pacific theater, he talks about his crew, training in B-17s in Oahu [Hawaii], transfer to the British Fiji Islands, working with Australian troops, and moving to Espiritu Santo Island in preparation for Guadalcanal. He tells an amusing story about the reaction of his unit's chaplain to seeing bare breasted women in the Solomon Islands. Eventually stationed at Henderson Field [Guadalcanal], Stapleton comments on helping to defend Bougainville, flying on several missions while under heavy Japanese fire, and having a close call when anti-aircraft fire hit the wing of his plane. He tells of flying a Navy photographer who, they discovered after landing, had died from lack of oxygen. Stapleton speaks of a bombardier from his crew who committed suicide and describes Waskowitz, a pilot from his squadron whom he saw get shot out of the sky. He tells of being stuck in the hospital with a wrenched back during the Battle of Midway and his pilot, Wessman, flying the plane to safety in Hawaii. He touches upon R&R in New Zealand, hitchhiking back to the United States on a Dutch freighter in 1943, gambling on the way home, and marriage while on leave. Reassigned to stateside duty, he touches upon his search and rescue work with crashed training planes in Scott's Bluff [Nebraska], becoming a radar instructor at Truax Field [Wisconsin], retiring after twenty-five years in the service, belonging to several veterans

organizations, and working for twenty-one years in the State of Wisconsin's community shelter program during the Cold War, showing civilians how to build bomb shelters.

Biographical Sketch:

Stapleton [1919-2006] served with the Army Air Corps during World War II. While at Pearl Harbor, he was a member of the 50th Reconnaissance Squadron and joined the 431st Bomb Squadron in the Pacific. During the Korean War, he served a year in the Air Inspector's Office in Kunsan [South Korea]. He retired from the Air Force after 25 years and settled in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.
Transcribed by Daniel Walker, 2010.
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010.
Corrections typed by Erin Dix, 2010.
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

Jim: Here we go.

Mel: All right.

Jim: Here we go now. Mel, ah, what year were you born?

Mel: 1919.

Jim: 1919. Where was that?

Mel: North Lake, Wisconsin.

Jim: North Lake?

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: What was that near?

Mel: Near Oconomowoc.

Jim: Ah. Okay. And when did you enter military service?

Mel: May 13, 1939. Pretty good with that one, aren't I?

Jim: Very good. [Mel laughs] And how did that come about? That was before the war when—did—were you drafted? Is that—

Mel: I was never drafted. There were ten kids in my family, and the first two got to college and became teachers, but I knew that there was no way that I was ever gonna be able to go to college. We were still in the Depression.

Jim: Right.

Mel: And, uh, so I joined the Army Air Corps in 1939 at Chanute Field, Illinois.

Jim: You were gonna be a pilot?

Mel: I was gonna be.

Jim: Right. [Mel laughs] So you went down directly to Chanute Field and did your basic training there?

Mel: Yeah.

- Jim: Then what happened after you did that?
- Mel: So then they sent me to Randolph Air Force base, Randolph Field at that time for pre-pilot examination.
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Mel: And I got to the eye doctor and he said, “Who the hell sent you down here? You can’t see!” [Both laugh] You had to have 20/20 without glasses in those days—and I had a letter in my pocket from General Hap Arnold saying, “*Now* get in the service and go to Randolph.” So I washed out because of my eyes, and I showed the doctor that letter from General Hap Arnold, and he about fell over. [Laughs]
- Jim: How did you happen to have that letter?
- Mel: A good friend, a good mutual friend, he was from North Lake, and he worked for Hap Arnold in Washington. And I had been thinking about the military for quite a while and, so, he told Hap Arnold, and he said, “Not—tell him not yet, not yet.” And sooner or later I got a letter from Hap Arnold saying, “*Now* go to Randolph.” [Laughs] And so the eye surgeon was pretty put-out or chagrined that—
- Jim: Arnold was messing with stuff he didn’t know anything about!
- Mel: Yeah. [Laughs]
- Jim: Right. So what happens when you got to the next base? What did they train you to do then?
- Mel: Then I came back to Chanute.
- Jim: Oh.
- Mel: And it was a cold, cold snowy day in middle Illinois, and I saw all the aircraft mechanics out there working on airplanes, and I said, “I don’t want to be an airplane mechanic.” So I, uh, I took up radio. Radio operator and mechanic and later on radar. So—
- Jim: Where did they send you for radio school?
- Mel: Right at Chanute.
- Jim: Oh, it was at Chanute.
- Mel: Yeah. Later on Scott Field became the radio school.

Jim: Also Madison had one.

Mel: Yes. [Unintelligible]

Jim: So, you went to radio school. How long was that training?

Mel: Oh, boy.

Jim: A couple of months, or longer?

Mel: Two or three months. I don't remember that much.

Jim: Was it difficult?

Mel: No, no. I had a kind of a—

Jim: A knack for it?

Mel: Yeah. And I built my family's first crystal radio in—

Jim: Well, you had a head start on the other guys.

Mel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jim: Yeah I remember those crystal radios. I used to fuss over them.

Mel: Yeah [laughs].

Jim: Never got much out of them.

Mel: Well, I heard WLS one day from Chicago, and that was reaching out pretty good, and—

Jim: Sure. That's pretty good. Yeah, that was a pretty big station in those days.

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: I remember listening to it. Okay, so, your radio training, did that include doing a lot of flying, or hadn't you been assigned to an airplane yet?

Mel: Not yet, no. We had the old B-18s. First airplane I ever worked on was a B-2, the second edition of the bombers that the Air—

Jim: Right. They didn't stick around long.

Mel: No. [Laughs]

Jim: That wasn't very airworthy, that one.

Mel: It was a dummy [laughs].

Jim: So, now that you're an expert, what do they do with you?

Mel: Pardon?

Jim: What did they do with you now that you became an expert in radio?

Mel: Well, I became an instructor, as a matter of fact, at Chanute for a while, and then the first sergeant and I had a falling out and you know who was the first to go. [Laughs] He said, "Where do you wanna go, Panama or a Hawaiian island?" And I said, "I'll take Hawaii." [laughs] So I got to Hawaii in 1940.

Jim: Do you recall the month?

Mel: Uh, May.

Jim: Til May, 5/40. Then they sent [you] to an airbase in Hawaii?

Mel: Hickam—

Jim: Hickam Field?

Mel: Hickam Field. That's right next to Pearl Harbor.

Jim: I know where it is, I've been there.

Mel: Have ya?

Jim: Yup.

Mel: It wasn't near as big as it is now, International Airport. [Hickam Air Force Base shares its runways with Honolulu International Airport.]

Jim: And your job at Hickam Field?

Mel: Radio. I was—

Jim: Repair, or—

Mel: Radio repair, installation—

Jim: But not flying?

Mel: Not flying yet, no.

Jim: Okay.

Mel: We, uh, we got up in a couple of the old B-18s, but they were mostly for joyrides or to get to the other islands, and so forth. We didn't get assigned to crews until after the war started, and our B-17s were coming in. Some came in before the war started, but some came in during the attack.

Jim: That's what the radar showed—they thought were those planes.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Instead they were Japanese, right?

Mel: That's exactly right.

Jim: Yeah, that's quite the story. Okay.

Mel: I knew, there were two ground radar operators, and I knew one of them. They were the ones who detected the Japs coming in—

Jim: Oh, really?

Mel: And, uh—

Jim: And this lieutenant said, "No, they weren't Japs."

Mel: That's right.

Jim: You knew those guys!

Mel: Yeah, I knew one of them. I can't think of their names now. They both became officers. I guess the government thought they owed them something, so they became officers and went on career-wise. At least one of them did.

Jim: So you're in the regular Air Force now. It was the Air Corps then.

Mel: The Air Corps.

Jim: So, tell me about Pearl Harbor attack. What was going—

- Mel: [Coughs for several seconds] Most of us were—
- Jim: Want to pause here for a second? Okay. [Approximately 5-second pause in recording] Back online here, as they say in showbiz.
- Mel: Yep.
- Jim: [Laughs]
- Mel: You're—
- Jim: Okay. You were sound asleep and all of a sudden something—you hear noise and bombs and so forth.
- Mel: We were up—
- Jim: Oh.
- Mel: Most of us, a gang of guys from my squadron, four of us went down to the PX [Post Exchange] for Sunday breakfast and we were trying to get Siebert[??] awake to go with us, but he'd been down on the beaches all night long so he [chuckles] he was sleeping in. **And we were on the** second floor of the barracks when we heard this “boom, boom, boom,” and—
- Jim: What'd you think it was?
- Mel: Pardon?
- Jim: What'd you think it was?
- Mel: Well, we all said, “What in the hell is the Navy doing—”
- Jim: Practice bombing on Sunday?
- Mel: [Laughs] Yeah. So, and then we were looking out the barracks window and I saw the first Japanese plane fly by about 8:15, 8:30, don't know. And we saw the red—
- Jim: Ball.
- Mel: The red ball on the side of the airplane. He didn't make it; he crashed into the Hawaiian Air Depot hangar. So we knew at least one was a goner. But they were all over the place. I'll never forget; we were running from the barracks to the flight line because that's where all the guns were. Some of them were in the airplanes. But I was running through a puddle of water,

and I stopped to throw my shoes off. I knelt down and here's the front headline to Collier's Magazine—that's no longer in print, but it was a very popular magazine—

Jim: I remember Collier's.

Mel: --in 1939, 1940. And the headline was that Secretary of the Navy—I can't think of his name now—

Jim: Frank Knox.

Mel: Frank Knox. And he said, "Pearl Harbor is impregnable." That was the headline on Collier's Magazine that day. Didn't look very impregnable to me. [Laughs] So, we got down to the flight line, and first thing we knew we had to get a gun of some kind. Air Force didn't have many war guns, .30-06 rifles and pistols. So the armament chief said, "Everybody signs out for these guns." [Laughs] What a stupid time to have people sign out, so I grabbed a pistol and ran. The hangars were two by two, they were alongside of each other, and in between the hangars were the instrument shops and the radio shops and so forth; mechanics. And I was going between the two hangars, and a bomb dropped on one of them, and my buddy and I were running to the other hangar, but the walls started tumbling down and we were just covered with concrete blocks and so forth, and I got up and tried to shake Jim, and he was dead. So I came that close in the first hour of the war to getting it.

Jim: He got hit in the head—probably—with one of those--

Mel: Yeah, yeah. So, we were scattered around, nobody knew what in the hell to do. So we milled around in the shops, I guess, waiting for the next bomb to hit. Well, the bomb had hit outside the hangar, and then left a pretty big crater, so we dived into the bomb crater because we had no bomb shelters. And that's where we stayed for the first attack.

Jim: Were they strafing then too or just dropping—

Mel: Oh, yeah. They were—a bunch of them were lower level.

Jim: Right, that's what I was—

Mel: Yep.

Jim: They took out some of your airplanes right underneath you.

Mel: You bet, yep.

Jim: Did anyone make an effort to put those fires out, or did they just let them--

Mel: No, the--

Jim: Everybody's too much in a panic I suppose.

Mel: The fire chief, the fire chief got killed in the first attack, and, well, everything was pandemonium. Nobody knew—nobody knew any ways that they take[??] leadership that was—no way to do it. Eventually they got the fire trucks going and tried to put them out, but the fires were closer.

Jim: Did you get corralled into being a fireman?

Mel: [Laughs] No, no, we dived into that bomb crater.

Jim: Right.

Mel: About six or seven of us, and just waited out. We were watching the high level guys because we couldn't see the low level. It was too high up under the crater. It was a pretty good sized crater.

Jim: What was the decision in that crater? What did you decide was going on?

Mel: [Laughs]

Jim: Did you have it figured out then, or not?

Mel: We knew that, we knew that Hickam Field at least was getting bombed, and that was bombed—

Jim: You knew they were Japanese.

Mel: Yeah, yeah, we knew that before in the barracks because I had seen that airplane. And I don't know what the hell I was doing, but I put my arm up to see if I couldn't see something better, and that happened. [Motions to arm]

Jim: Where did that hit you? Up here in the elbow, or right here?

Mel: All of this.

Jim: Oh, this got burned.

- Mel: Yeah, just burnt, shrapnel burned. And I had blood all over me—brand new uniform—I don't know how I happened to have that on that day, but—
- Jim: Were you hit with some pieces of shrapnel?
- Mel: Yeah.
- Jim: I was gonna say, the burn wouldn't cause the blood.
- Mel: No, no. Shrapnel. Some guy said, "We gotta get you to the hospital!" And I said, "How the hell are we going [both laugh] to the hospital? It's ten blocks away." And there was no way, you couldn't—there was no transportation. The water—the streets were full of water, and I couldn't, nobody could hoof—huff it—ten blocks. So I said, "Just tie a bunch of bandages around." Had first aid kits in the—
- Jim: Oh—
- Mel: Shops, and so they wrapped a bunch of bandages around—I said, "Now, put a tourniquet on my arm," and now I know tourniquets aren't worth a damn, but at the time we didn't—we didn't know they weren't. And it worked pretty good.
- Jim: Tourniquets always work.
- Mel: Yeah, yeah. It was just the compression of blood and so forth. So, that was the first attack. And then, I don't remember whether they had to go back and rearm or what, but it slowed down and became quiet for a little while.
- Jim: Took about two and a half hours before they returned.
- Mel: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Okay.
- Mel: And, uh, we thought they were done, you know? Everything was quiet, and here they came again. [Laughs] Let's see, I can't remember where I was then—
- Jim: They'd moved you out of the crater?
- Mel: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: To where? In one of the hangars?

- Mel: One of the hangars, yeah. We saw a bunch of dead bodies, and some still living, and we had—we arranged for an ambulance to come over and take the wounded to the hospital, and I think the water was down. The water was about three feet deep from—they bombed the—
- Jim: Water tower?
- Mel: Water system—
- Jim: Oh.
- Mel: That ran under the runways. That was what they called the aqua system, and it drove the gasoline out to the airplanes. It forced the gasoline for refueling. But the water went down, I don't know where, probably to the ocean. [laughs] So we were able to get the wounded to the hospital as far as I can remember—well, everybody that was in my hangar anyway. But—
- Jim: So they took you to the hospital?
- Mel: No, no, no. I was doing fine except that I needed a new shirt, and—then what happened? Then they came back again. I can't remember where I was. I guess we must have stayed in the hangar—dumb place to stay because we knew they were--
- Jim: That's what they were attacking.
- Mel: Yeah. [Laughs] But, there simply was no place to go. Couldn't get—we had 3,200 guys in that barracks. It was a big H-wing barracks, and many of them got killed. But it was late for breakfast—eight o'clock in the morning. So they were all alone somewhere, except the cooks. The cooks all went to the kitchen, and they killed 4,800 of them—direct hit on the—
- Jim: On the kitchen?
- Mel: Forty-eight, forty-eight cooks, not 4,800.
- Jim: Right, yeah. What was your outfit—I forgot to ask you—what was your outfit that you were in at that time?
- Mel: 50th Reconnaissance Squadron.
- Jim: 50th? Five-oh? 50th?
- Mel: Mm-hmm.

Jim: Recon Squad.

Mel: Later became the 431st Bomb Squadron. I just can't remember what we did, or how we got—when we got reorganized or—certainly nothing that day.

Jim: Was your barracks damaged?

Mel: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Jim: So your sleeping quarters were not there?

Mel: They were there. They were damaged mostly from, well, the strafing planes—strafed them very long on the—but they—

Jim: That wouldn't knock them down, probably.

Mel: No. The first ward got badly battered. Those barracks are still there today, and they still have the—

Jim: Bullet holes?

Mel: Bullet holes, and shell marks. They purposely kept it that way. Several years ago when I went back to Hawaii we took movies of those shell holes in the barracks.

Jim: [Unintelligible] right?

Mel: Yeah. And the other thing—oh, [coughs] several of us ran out to get in the cars in the parking lot. We had a gigantic parking lot around that barracks, and the bullets kept winging in there, and we said, "We gotta get out of here." He said, "I don't know what they're shooting at. Either they're poor aim or something." They were trying to shoot the flag off the flagpole. That flag is still in Hickam Field headquarters today, full of bullet holes. They damn near shot it down, but didn't.

Jim: What did you do for food now, about this time?

Mel: [Laughs] Well--

Jim: Late in the afternoon—what did you do for food? Do you recall?

Mel: All the cooks were dead.

Jim: Right.

- Mel: And it was grab a sandwich or something—I don't remember what we did, but we—and that lasted for weeks because there were no cooks coming in on the boats.
- Jim: Well, then how did you get stuff done?
- Mel: We had the old field—
- Jim: C-rations?
- Mel: Field—I don't think we had C-rations yet—
- Jim: K. K-rations are smaller.
- Mel: Mostly got K-rations, and whatever we could find.
- Jim: Did you have trouble finding fresh water?
- Mel: No, no. That was—that was—I don't know how it survived, but we had fresh water.
- Jim: Were your personal belongings damaged by the attack on the barracks?
- Mel: No, no. We were on the second floor, and I don't think there were—I don't remember what we did about that. Where did we stay? There were a bunch of houses on the field, ranch type houses that many of the married NCO's and officers had occupied before the attack. Most of the wives had already gone home because we knew something was going haywire, and so we used those houses for—
- Jim: What was your rank at that time, Mel?
- Mel: Buck Sergeant, Buck Sergeant.
- Jim: Great[??]
- Mel: Then I, let's see—
- Jim: I suppose you spent a lot of time trying to help reconstruct the things that were broken and damaged and—
- Mel: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: But you didn't—you weren't flying then, and--

- Mel: No, we got—I think it was four airplanes airworthy out of fifty or sixty, and the next morning—yeah—next morning a pilot came up and said, “We have to go, we have to put together a crew to go find the Japanese fleet.” And he said, “Stapleton, you’re the radio operator.” I said, “What do we do if we find them?” [Laughs] He said, “We’ll take the biggest carrier we can find, and dive straight into it.” I said, “This is a hell of a way to volunteer for anything.” [laughs]
- Jim: You’re here to start a war.
- Mel: Yeah [laughs]. So we went out there looking for them in an old B-18.
- Jim: Oh, you weren’t in any of the B-17s?
- Mel: No, no. Ninety mile an hour B-18.
- Jim: They’d have shot you down in a second.
- Mel: [laughs] Flying in a second—they’d have taken us down on takeoff.
- Jim: [laughs] Oh, my.
- Mel: And I looked out there after—we had to fly in a pie-shaped pattern—out and across and back, and we were just about into the pie shape at the top arc, and I looked out there, and I saw—my God—a terrible fleet of ships, and I didn’t say a thing. [Both laugh] But someone else saw them, and we took off after that fleet, and thank God it was the Japanese fleet coming in from the Aleutians.
- Jim: You mean the American fleet.
- Mel: Yeah, excuse me. American fleet [laughs].
- Jim: Yes, good thing.
- Mel: Yeah. We’d have never been here, no way. So that’s how I spent the second day of the war.
- Jim: Did you get—have radio contact with them on your radio?
- Mel: Well, after we—
- Jim: You had to worry about them shooting *you* down, you know, if they panicked and then, you know—
- Mel: We didn’t know the radio frequencies.

Jim: Ah, that's right, you didn't know them.

Mel: So we came back and landed and thanked our blazed stars that we made it. And then the B-17s started coming in, some during the attack, and they landed in school yards, golf courses.

Jim: The runway was strewn with debris and potholes and--

Mel: Yeah, yeah. Then the second or third day another bunch of B-17s came in, and so we just bulldozed those—all the un-flyable airplanes off into the middle of the flying field, and got us running to the new B-17s. But it took the business of getting crews organized, and my pilot, Wessman, he says, "I want that guy for radio operator." [Laughs]

Jim: He, the guy that took you on that little trip in the--

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Mel: Yeah. So, I flew with him all during the war.

Jim: Same pilot?

Mel: Same pilot.

Jim: What was his name?

Mel: Wessman.

Jim: West-man? W-e-s-t-m-a-n?

Mel: W-e-s-s-m-a-n.

Jim: Got it.

Mel: Our plane was called 'Knucklehead' because Wessman was kind of a dummy in flight school [laughs]. So—

Jim: Is he still alive?

Mel: No, he got killed in a car accident six or seven years ago. The rest of the crew, I think most of them are dead. We lost three in air battles.

Jim: Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I don't wanna miss anything.

Mel: [Laughs]

Jim: Now, you've formed up in your first crew then?

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Was this still in the 50th Recon Squadron?

Mel: Changed into the 431st sometime in early '41. The Recon Squadron was mostly—

Jim: Forty-first, did you say?

Mel: 431st.

Jim: Four-Thirty-First what?

Mel: Bomb Squadron.

Jim: Bomb Squadron. With B-17s?

Mel: Mm-hmm.

Jim: Got it. Okay. When you formed up, where'd that squadron go?

Mel: I don't know how they predicted that something was going to go haywire, but we had a lot of scattered fields over on the seacoast of Oahu. I should explain that Oahu is one of the five Hawaiian Islands.

Jim: Oh, know all about that.

Mel: Ours was over on the west coast of Oahu, and I can't remember the name of it. Kaneohe Bay was a Navy base over close to where we were, but we were—we stayed there for several months, several months, practicing and training and getting our crews together.

Jim: How big of a squadron was that, your bomb squadron, how big? How many airplanes, roughly?

Mel: Fifteen.

Jim: Fifteen.

Mel: Fifteen airplanes, and the B-17 had a ten man crew, and I was radio operator. Later on radar operator. We brought in a bunch of English type radars. The United States hadn't advanced that far yet. So we had some

English radars, and they were tough to read. They were pretty new developments for the English.

Jim: Did you double as a waist gunner?

Mel: Yes, yeah.

Jim: Tell me about learning that.

Mel: Well, they were there, and you just [both laugh] kept pumping shells into them.

Jim: How did they teach you how to lead and all that?

Mel: Oh, I guess I read that in a wild west book about 1935.

Jim: You weren't a bird shooter before the war?

Mel: No. [Laughs]

Jim: Because if you were a bird shooter you'd know about leading.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Okay. So what did you—you stayed just outside of—in the Hawaiian Islands and just ran practice runs. Did you go up to Baker or go up to, uh, Wake Island at all? Did you fly up there?

Mel: Yeah, we did.

Jim: Yeah, I thought so.

Mel: Wake Island was kind of our second home. We did a lot of flying out of there, and it was a good place to train crews going from Hawaii to Wake and back.

Jim: Okay.

Mel: Some of my real good friends got shot down between Wake and Hawaii. General Tinker, full blooded Indian, but he was a general, major general. And he was headed to 7th—7th Army Fleet or something like that, and he got shot down. One of my favorite radio operators, Bill Hangey[??] went with him. We were in formation with him coming back from Wake in a terrible, terrible storm. Must have been some kind of coastal cyclone, and I was talking code back and forth with Bill and all of a sudden, silence. They were down. Never knew what happened to them.

- Jim: Were you attacked by Japanese airplanes, or was this ground fire?
- Mel: No, it would've been airplanes if it was Japanese; I think it was the weather.
- Jim: Ah. Okay. Must have been struck by lightning then.
- Mel: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Okay. So, then what? When was your move off away from Hawaii? Do you recall when that was?
- Mel: Sometime in the summer of '42. We moved out to Fiji. Our squadron all went to Fiji; the other squadrons went to various other islands. We landed at Christmas Island in July to refuel and finally got down to Fiji, and I had been trying to contact Fiji, or the Royal Amer—Royal Air Force by radio. We came in there at two o'clock in the afternoon.
- Jim: That was a British base?
- Mel: Yeah. It was manned by the Australians, but it was Royal Air Force. We came down on the ground, and I contacted the radio shack and I said, "Where the hell—where was everybody?" We thought they were under attack because nobody was answering me. We had no place else to go. So we went on to Fiji, and yeah—so I was asking everybody, "Where were the radio people?" And they said, "Don't you Americans know we stop for tea in the afternoon?" [Laughs]
- Jim: It was the wrong time of day; it was after four, wasn't it?
- Mel: Yeah. So we stayed on Fiji for—oh, they were building runways up to the island, and our eventual post was Espiritu Santo Island, south of Guadalcanal. We couldn't reach them from Fiji, but we could from Espiritu Santo. So finally they had the runway done. They were being built by Navy Seabees, and then we moved up to Espiritu Santo. They were pretty much routine. I'm not going to tell them that story about, uh, getting too—[Laughs] Well, maybe just once. We were the only—Espiritu Santo was a French Island. There were only a few French overseers over the coconut bearers, and all of the coconut people were ladies, and the chaplain, our chief chaplain, Father Schleine [??], he went up with us on the first flight. I was in group command, this plane. We went up to test the runway, see if it was safe for the rest of them. We got out of the airplane and here all the, all the Bora Bora girls from the coconut plantations were down to greet us. But all they had on was a loincloth. [Laughs]

- Jim: You were in heaven!
- Mel: And Chaplain Schleine [??] says, “Stape, you get on the radio and tell them the next plane comes up here bring a bunch of ODs [Olive drab] scrap Tee shirts.” And the next plane came up, and they came down to welcome in again, and we all handed out scrap shirts to all the ladies that were there.
- Jim: You just had the wrong chaplain.
- Mel: [laughs] Next day another plane came up, they all had to flock down to see the airplanes, and they had all the shirts on, but every one of them were cut out. [Both laugh for about 10 seconds] And Chaplain Schleine [??] says, “Stape, you call back to Fiji and tell them the next plane that comes up, bring a case of brandy.” He said, “Now, I need one.”
- Jim: Oh, that’s cute. Good story. Good story. So what was your duty on Espiritu Santo?
- Mel: Getting ready to—oh, oh no. Espiritu Santo, we were attacking Guadalcanal.
- Jim: Okay, that’s what I’m asking you, are you—
- Mel: Yeah.
- Jim: You got there then just before the landing at Guadalcanal.
- Mel: That’s right.
- Jim: That was in August, as you were there a month earlier.
- Mel: Yeah. Yeah, we did a lot of bomb runs.
- Jim: Were you opposed by Japanese antiaircraft?
- Mel: No, they had rifles. They didn’t—they hadn’t—that was a steady move down through the islands by the Japanese, but they didn’t have any—
- Jim: Antiaircraft of consequence, and no airplanes against you?
- Mel: No, well, yeah, we eventually won Henderson Field away from the Japanese, but then we got blown off again, and the Japanese took over. But in that first bunch of raids that we accomplished against their ground troops, they didn’t have any air support.

Jim: So they were milk runs [routine and uneventful flights], really.

Mel: Pardon?

Jim: [Loudly] They were milk runs, really then.

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: You bombed around 10,000 feet?

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Yeah, so you had no reason to go higher[??]

Mel: But we—later on they said that we killed 20,000 Japanese in those bombing runs.

Jim: Those are estimates that are dubious at—

Mel: Dubious, very dubious, but I didn't think about that until later when we—when this, when you smell blood all the time, you know, there was quite a bit of casualties on—

Jim: Where did you smell the blood?

Mel: After the first flight out of Espiritu Santo, and by then we had taken back Guadalcanal, Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, and we landed there a couple of days after our first attack.

Jim: Oh, that's when you smelled the blood in the—

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Okay.

Mel: We knew there were a bunch of casualties at least. So then it was on and off again, and later the Japanese—

Jim: You landed in Henderson Field?

Mel: Yeah. And stayed there for, if I recall, a couple of months. Flew missions out of there—

Jim: Out of Henderson?

Mel: Out of Henderson.

Jim: You were flying up the “Slot” [New Georgia Sound, a body of water running through the middle of the Solomon Islands] then?

Mel: On up to Bus—Busboon—something. Going up the “Slot.”

Jim: Bougainville.

Mel: Bougainville. Yep.

Jim: That’s where you were. Okay.

Mel: Yep. And—

Jim: But still no air opposition?

Mel: Oh, yeah, now that the Japanese—

Jim: Okay, now we’re getting to it.

Mel: The Japanese were on Bougainville and had their own runways, and yeah, we got in a lot of big fights then.

Jim: How did you do against them, their Zero?

Mel: Well, I did pretty good. I shot down two of them.

Jim: Did you? Put the radio down and picked up the—you were the waist gunner?

Mel: Yeah. Two and a half airplanes.

Jim: That’s pretty good.

Mel: My buddy got the other half. [Both laugh]

Jim: Did your plane suffer much damage in those attacks?

Mel: No, later—my mind doesn’t—

Jim: Just take your time and let it come out in a clean order here.

Mel: Later we got hit by a Navy Japanese—oh yeah, we were bombing some Japanese ships, cargo and cruisers, and we got hit. The radio compartment was very close to the wings, right between the wings, and I heard the ‘Pow,’ but we didn’t blow up. So we went back to base and landed. I was

the first one out of the plane, and I went up looking at the plane for damage, and we had a 20 mm, or whatever the Japanese—about a 20 mm went right through our wing and kept going.

Jim: Didn't explode?

Mel: Didn't explode.

Jim: Lucky.

Mel: Very. If—that was an inch behind the main spar that ran between the wings.

Jim: It would've taken the wings off.

Mel: Yeah. Oh, if it'd hit that main spar—

Jim: Right.

[Approximately 20-second pause in recording]

Mel: Airplane wing at home. Still have it.

Jim: How big a piece?

Mel: About *that*—

Jim: Did everybody take a hunk and take it home with them?

Mel: No, I have the only hunk. I was the first out of the airplane.

Jim: That missed your radio, though.

Mel: Yeah, yup, completely missed the radio. Just the wing. If that had been an inch closer, because that spar was pretty significant to keep the balance of the wings, and any damage to that main spar, you'd lose a wing immediately.

Jim: How many missions did you have from Henderson Field? Do you recall? Roughly.

Mel: In the total war I had fifty-four missions.

Jim: Total, out of everything from—in the South Pacific.

Mel: Yeah, everything from Fiji on up.

Jim: They're combat missions, not from those practice things.

Mel: No.

Jim: Fifty-four combat missions.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Okay, I'm catching up here.

Mel: And let's see, then it became kind of—if you can call a war routine—became routine bombing missions and transport missions and—

Jim: Oh? What transport missions?

Mel: Going back to the base to Fiji and other bases to get supplies and so forth.

Jim: Did you carry wounded back with you or no?

Mel: Oh yeah, yeah.

Jim: So that's [unintelligible] we know.

Mel: Sure, yeah.

Jim: Okay. How'd you deal with them aboard ship?

Mel: I'm sorry?

Jim: How'd you deal with the wounded aboard your airplane?

Mel: Oh, God. They were pretty well bandaged up, and we left them in the bomb bays of the airplane.

Jim: You didn't have to do anything to them?

Mel: No [coughs].

Jim: They're pretty [unintelligible]. Okay. [Mel coughs] All right.

Mel: One—now what was I just thinking about? The first thing to go is the mind. You know that?

Jim: Yes, sir. I'm 77. I know that. [Mel laughs]

- Mel: Ah, damn those—[pause] Oh, we had a Navy photographer onboard one time. Two of ours had been shot, and we were photographing the islands above Bougainville for the next assault. We were flying *very* high, 15,000 or more feet. We had a tub in the bottom of the radio compartment, that—I can't remember what—it was an under vision tub that protruded from the airplane, and it was also the cameraman's place or spot.
- Jim: It was Plexiglas?
- Mel: Yeah.
- Jim: Yeah, you could see through it.
- Mel: Yeah.
- Jim: Right. Okay.
- Mel: And we came back from one mission, and the pilot said we were going to land. We had reduced down to 3,000 feet, and he said everybody take off their oxygen masks and so forth, and he said, "Stape, get that Navy guy out of the tub," and he was dead. He was dead. He hadn't gotten his oxygen mask on or didn't know how to—he was a Navy photographer. He wasn't shot or anything, just died from [lack of?] oxygen.
- Jim: Nobody heard a peep out of him?
- Mel: Nope, no. Not a thing. He was right next to me in that tub in the radio compartment.
- Jim: I'll be darned.
- Mel: He wore a beard which was unheard of in the Air Force, but—
- Jim: That might be one of the reasons why his oxygen mask didn't quite fit.
- Mel: That's, that's what we think. Yeah. He had a heavy beard, too. He was a good friend of mine. We think it was his heavy beard that killed him.
- Jim: That's unusual. That's one story I've never heard before. I've heard a lot of the others, but that's different. So when did you leave Henderson Field and start going home? Or did you go home from Henderson Field?
- Mel: Well, in between the—sometime in October or November we got a—
- Jim: Of which year? '43?

Mel: '42.

Jim: Oh, same year.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Okay.

Mel: We got an R&R to New Zealand, and all the air crews got to take a break for a couple of weeks in New Zealand.

Jim: Did you enjoy that?

Mel: Oh, it was great.

Jim: Did you behave yourself?

Mel: More or less [laughs].

Jim: More or less. No worse than anybody else, right?

Mel: No [laughs]

Jim: Okay [laughs]

Mel: Good words [both laugh]. But we had a fatality there. We were all supposed to report to the airplane at 7 o'clock in the morning, sobered up, busy getting ready to go and what have you, and Wessman yelled—we had hotel rooms—Wessman yelled over to me and said, “Go get what’s his name, the bombardier from our crew.” I went over to his room, and he was dead. Shot himself in the brain. He left a note, he said, “I will never go back to war again.”

Jim: That was totally unexpected?

Mel: Totally unexpected. We—

Jim: Did he seem to be a jolly fellow?

Mel: Yeah. We were having a great time. Not any suspect of it at all.

Jim: I had a similar problem aboard the hospital ship. The—one of the anesthesiologists used to spend hours telling us about how he was going to plan this reunion when we get back home from Korea. He had names and addresses, and he thought he was gonna do this and he was gonna do that—he got back to Great Lakes, and he killed himself. You know, he had

all these names, and we all assumed that he would be leading the charge and we'd all get together, and he was the guy that was going to do it. One week after he got home he turned on the gas.

Mel: God. Waskowitz, not Waskowitz. I'm gonna have to tell you about Waskowitz. The bombardier shot himself in the head that morning. Anyway, Fritz Waskowitz was an All-American from Oregon University 1939 football team. He was a pilot in our squadron. We made one raid up—

Jim: He wasn't your pilot—

Mel: No. One raid up above Bougainville, and our whole squadron was up there on that raid, and Waskowitz said to the group commander—I can't—Sweeney. He said, "My bombs won't drop!" And Sweeney said, "Well, just fly it back home with us and forget it." He said, "Nope, I'm going on radio silence, and I'm going to make another run." Sweeney said to me, he said, "Stape, get on the wire and call that guy and tell him to come back here." By this time he had swung around and made another bomb run, and never made it. Antiaircraft fire hit him right in the bomb bay. Just blew the airplane apart. Whole crew got—that's what happened to Fritz Waskowitz. Great pilot, great guy.

Jim: Were you watching the plane at the time?

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: You blink your eye, and then he's gone.

Mel: Gone, yeah.

Jim: Jesus[??]

Mel: Sure, we were all watching for that one plane making a single run. I was with the group commander so we had a—we were up above most of the planes in back. We had a clear view of how he was making that run. Then, "blewy!" Gone.

Jim: Another surprise.

Mel: Yeah. But that's the way Waskowitz was. He was a fiery character, and he wasn't going to let one bomb miss deter him from making another run.

Jim: When you were in New Zealand on R&R, did you have—eat in restaurants and enjoy the—

- Mel: Oh yeah. Yeah, and this is '42, late—yeah, and New Zealand was terribly bereft of men. They had all been shipped over by the—
- Jim: Just like Australia.
- Mel: Yeah, sure. They all went to Africa.
- Jim: Right.
- Mel: They wanted all of us to come back after the war and live in New Zealand and work there.
- Jim: Who wanted you to do that, the ladies?
- Mel: [Laughs] Well, some of the ladies, but the industrialists. They didn't have anybody to do the work. Then, let's see. As I said before it was routine war missions up and down the chain of islands.
- Jim: How long were you in Henderson Field after your R&R in New Zealand?
- Mel: Well, we alternated back and forth to Espiritu Santo. I don't think we ever got on the field up in Bougainville. I don't remember, but we alternated back and forth between—when we got blown off of Henderson we went back to Espiritu Santo and kept the war going from there.
- Jim: And when did you return home? **[End of Tape 1, Side B]**
- Mel: Ah—March of '43.
- Jim: Did you come back by airplane, or did you come back by ship?
- Mel: [Laughs] That's another funny war story.
- Jim: Good!
- Mel: They told us to write orders from the group that the whole group air crews were relieved from duty and could go back to the States. It didn't say how, and [laughs] we *literally* hitchhiked with a Dutch freighter back to the United States.
- Jim: “We”— you mean your plane—single plane crew?
- Mel: No, it was several crews.
- Jim: Okay. All right.

- Mel: Yeah, I don't know how many they—
- Jim: Thirty or forty guys or—
- Mel: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Okay. Well that took a while, if you're going back on a Dutch freighter from that far away. [Mel laughs] It must have taken you three weeks to get home.
- Mel: Oh, yeah, let's see: I think it was twenty-eight days.
- Jim: I believe it. I came back on a hospital ship from Japan to the United States. It took eighteen days, and they were steaming at, you know, twenty-eight knots.
- Mel: Yeah.
- Jim: That's a big ocean.
- Mel: And we had to skirt—well, we—oh, the war story. We got aboard at Espiritu Santo, and whatever that ship was doing they had run out of water. And they said there was no way to feed the water to the ship. So they said, "We have to pull into Fiji to get water." And there was another Dutch ship traveling with us, and they went on while we pulled in for water. And two days later here came the ship limping back. It had been attacked by Japanese and just barely made it back to Fiji. If we'd have been with them—
- Jim: Who knows?
- Mel: Who knows?
- Jim: So how'd you solve the water problem?
- Mel: [laughs] Well, they had water facilities in Fiji that could restock the ship. So then we went on that—what did I say—twenty-two day trip to California. "California here we come." Great feeling to get back in San Francisco.
- Jim: So that's where you came back. It felt pretty good going under that Golden Gate?
- Mel: Oh! [laughs]
- Jim: Was everybody in tears?

Mel: I would say so.

Jim: I would say so, too.

Mel: All the card games were not playing [laughs].

Jim: Right. The gambling stops for a brief moment, right, and look at the bridge, right?

Mel: Yeah [laughs].

Jim: I know about that.

Mel: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah that was—

Jim: Yeah, that really pulls at your heartstrings when you see that bridge.

Mel: Oh, man. Either way. Going out or coming back.

Jim: For different reasons.

Mel: Yeah. But I made pretty good money gambling on that trip home. I put my sister through comptometer school. That was the forbearers of computers I guess.

Jim: How much money did you make coming back, in three weeks?

Mel: Well, I sent 500 dollars home to my mother for her education. It paid the whole thing.

Jim: Very good.

Mel: Then I kept a few dollars for myself, you know.

Jim: Of course.

Mel: [Laughs] But I saved enough to—

Jim: Was this playing poker, or shooting dice?

Mel: Poker. Dice was faster, but you could lose it faster.

Jim: It goes both ways.

- Mel: [Laughs] Yeah. And I saved enough money to come home and get ready for a wedding, and marry my wife in April of '43.
- Jim: That's a big—another subject—when you were overseas, did you get mail pretty regularly or not?
- Mel: Not very regular, no, no. We generally had to wait for some transport plane that—God only knows where they came from.
- Jim: So when you got back from—were you discharged after you came back from San Francisco, discharged rather promptly after that?
- Mel: Let's see, where did I go? Well, by this time I had six years in the Air Force.
- Jim: What was your rank then, by the way?
- Mel: Master Sergeant. I says, "Hell, I might as well stay in for twenty years and retire." I stayed in for twenty-five.
- Jim: You did stay in for twenty-five?
- Mel: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: Oh, my.
- Mel: Yeah. Twenty-five years in the Air Force. Then I retired as a Chief Master Sergeant. That's what my license plate says, "Chief Master Sergeant Retired."
- Jim: Great. Well, now where did you go after you got married? Then where was your next base?
- Mel: Well, let's see. We started out at Scottsbluff, Nebraska—ah—because they were now training B-24 crews out of Scottsbluff, Nebraska. I had—through my radio and radar business—I had a truck with all the radio and radar gear we could build into it for search missions for planes that went down. There were a lot of them. They would get up over the mountains, the B-24, and for some reason or other they couldn't stand the altitude or something. This was an early B-24, and they had a lot of crashes out in the West. And we found a lot of them with my radio gear. So that was like starting the war all over again, finding crews—
- Jim: Yeah, that wasn't fun[??] — So were your duties in the United States after the war—you finished your tour of duties, your twenty-five years in the United States, or did you go overseas again?

Mel: No, no, I didn't. I went from base to base to base—

Jim: But you didn't leave the States?

Mel: No.

Jim: So you were mainly overseeing the development of the radio equipment and radar, or were you just involved with installing it in the airplanes?

Mel: Finally I was an instructor and up until the day I retired here at Truax Field in Madison.

Jim: That's where you finished your tour?

Mel: Yep, yeah.

Jim: I'll be darned.

Mel: Yeah. I was teaching radar to airborne crews.

Jim: This is how you ended up retiring in Madison?

Mel: Yep.

Jim: Because when it stopped, here you were and why not stay?

Mel: [laughs] Yeah.

Jim: That sort of thing?

Mel: Well, I had—my wife and I had been here for, I think between six and eight years, I can't remember. We got here in '54, and I retired in '62. Eight years? Yeah. Eight years at Truax.

Jim: So you retired at three-quarters pay?

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: And did you get any disability from your arm?

Mel: No, [laughs] no. I never did.

Jim: You never got any treatment for it, did you?

Mel: Never went to the hospital, to—

Jim: Did you get your Purple Heart?

Mel: No.

Jim: Sue 'em. [both laugh]

Mel: [Laughs] I never went to the hospital and checked in, so I didn't get the Purple Heart.

Jim: No, you can't get a Purple Heart unless somebody official sees it.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Okay, but tell me about what awards you did win.

Mel: Oh, boy. Should've brought the jacket. I have my—

Jim: Well, just tell me the important ones. The standard ones I know I can figure out.

Mel: Well, the Air Medal.

Jim: And how many clusters?

Mel: Three.

Jim: Three clusters.

Mel: That was, let's see; what was that—a cluster was twenty-five more missions. Yeah, for—Air Medal and three clusters.

Jim: Distinguished Flying Cross? No, probably not.

Mel: I missed a mission—oh, the battle of Midway. We got hit pretty good at Midway, and I wound up in the hospital.

Jim: You jumped over this period, you know.

Mel: [Laughs] Yeah.

Jim: You screwed up the—it's a television program [unintelligible].

Mel: [Laughs] Yeah. That's—the mind goes first, you know.

- Jim: Yes. Well, we have to stop now. Tell me what you did at Midway, and did you know what you were doing?
- Mel: Well, we didn't do anything but get bombed—
- Jim: You went out as a squadron?
- Mel: Out as a squadron?
- Jim: Yeah, you're 50th Recon then.
- Mel: Yeah.
- Jim: Okay. But do you recall what your mission was?
- Mel: We didn't fly—
- Jim: They probably didn't tell you anything.
- Mel: Oh yeah, let's see. Before the Japanese came in, that was another missed one on the part of the big boys. They didn't, they knew that the Japanese fleet was coming east, but they thought they were heading for San Francisco. Nobody thought about Midway.
- Jim: Oh, before the battle of Midway started, though, they knew exactly where they were and what they were doing—
- Mel: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Yeah, because you picked up on that.
- Mel: And our B-17s—well, the Marines on Midway didn't have many—didn't have *any* long-range planes. We had a couple of PBV-5s, Navy, but even their range, they were only a two engine airplane, and their range was limited—
- Jim: You were flying to Midway now; tell me what was your mission? Do you recall?
- Mel: No. We thought it was a kind of a war deployment of some kind or other.
- Jim: Did you encounter the fleet? Didn't you have a chance to bomb the Japanese? You did?

Mel: No, we didn't bomb. It was more one of those search missions. We didn't even have bombs aboard. It was go out and find the Japanese fleet, and get the hell out of there as soon as possible.

Jim: Yeah, the PBVs found them.

Mel: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

Jim: Okay. So then you returned back to—

Mel: Back to Midway.

Jim: Well, you didn't land at Midway, though.

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Were you on the ground when the Japanese put the first wave on Midway?

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: How did you keep your airplane from getting ruined?

Mel: Wessman and some Navy copilot—our copilot was killed at Midway—and they got the airplane off the ground and went back to Hawaii.

Jim: Right.

Mel: We lost a lot of B-17s—

Jim: Right, on the ground.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: On the ground, swatted[??], sure.

Mel: But Wessman said, "To hell with this, this is wartime and I'm getting out of here." [laughs]

Jim: So he took it back solo—the airplane—only alone?

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: And you were on that plane.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Okay.

Mel: But in between there I had wound up in the hospital for some damn thing. I can't remember what. Oh, a bad back. I wrenched my back terribly on a couple of runs so I was in the hospital when part of the attack on Midway—

Jim: Sure.

Mel: So I didn't get to fly on a couple of missions, and therefore I missed the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Jim: Okay. Have you kept in contact with any of this plane crew, other than the pilot? You said he just died shortly—

Mel: Yeah, no, I didn't.

Jim: None of the rest?

Mel: They scattered from hell to—Dallas Wells was our gunner underneath the airplane, the ball turret. I kept in touch with him until ten years ago, but I don't know where the rest of them are. Just evaporated.

Jim: Do you go up to EAA [Experimental Aircraft Association air show]—

Mel: Oh, yeah.

Jim: And wander around the B-17s—

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: When you go up there and relive your own experience?

Mel: I'm always looking to see if one of our crew members were there, but I wouldn't know them anyway now.

Jim: Did you ever go up and take another ride? I know they offer rides in those things.

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: You've done that?

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: What did it feel like going up in that thing?

- Mel: Then one came down—they own one, you know, a B-17. They brought it down to Truax for some flyover exhibition or something, and they took a bunch of my family through the thing and showed them what the—
- Jim: Oh, that's nice. So what did you do when you got out of the service?
- Mel: Oh, I went to work for the State of Wisconsin at a community shelter—no, a, yeah, community shelter program. This was the great day of the—
- Jim: Is that right? Community Shelter program, is that the—
- Mel: This was the day of getting fallout shelters ready for the entire United States in case of nuclear war.
- Jim: I built one.
- Mel: Did you?
- Jim: One of the stupidest things I've done.
- Mel: [Laughs] That was one of the stupidest jobs I ever had, but I worked for the State of Wisconsin for twenty years in that business. Twenty years. God, there's still a planner out there at Truax Field that works on community shelter plans.
- Jim: Hard to believe. [Mel laughs] If anybody's going to drop a bomb I wanna know where ground zero is because I don't want to be around to take care of 8 million casualties.
- Mel: How did you happen to build one? Or where?
- Jim: Just in the basement. I just blocked off a corner and got some cement blocks, put two layers up and made a little corner, and then I got two-by-fours and put them on end, and then put two layers of cement blocks above that. It was a great wine cellar.
- Mel: [Laughs] Yeah.
- Jim: And that's about it. [Both laugh]
- Mel: [Laughs] Well, it would've worked—could've worked.
- Jim: Yeah, it would have helped. It would have kept—what I want to know, as I said, what would you do after the bomb, you know, if everybody out there is a casualty and you're not, what would you do?

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Be no place to go or nothing to eat. Oh, well. Okay, is there anything you forgot to tell me?

Mel: I don't think so. I've retired again, after twenty-one years with the State of Wisconsin.

Jim: So you got pension from them, too.

Mel: Oh, yeah.

Jim: Well, you're in pretty good shape, Mel.

Mel: Well, I think so. [Both laugh]

Jim: That's good, you deserve it. Did you join any veterans organizations?

Mel: I belong to all of them. VFW, AMVETS [American Veterans].

Jim: I contribute to— I don't belong to any of them. But I find myself contributing. They keep sending—about every week I get a request for money for those guys.

Mel: Yeah, and they—

Jim: They never let up.

Mel: They never let up, and then you get a thank you letter, but send us some more [laughs].

Jim: I've made a chart [unintelligible] [Mel coughs] kinda, a checklist so I keep track. Otherwise I'd end up giving them some every week, you know, and I just check them off.

Mel: Yeah.

Jim: Three a year for each of them, that's all I'm going to give.

Mel: Good idea there, sir.

Jim: I'd just forget otherwise.

Mel: [Laughs] Yeah, I ask her, "Didn't we just send that out that—"

- Jim: Yeah, you gotta keep track. They're incessant. Now, do you feel that your training in radio was adequate? That's the last question I was going to ask you.
- Mel: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: Your training you got—you were able to do your job, the training was up to par.
- Mel: Yeah. One of the Medals I got, I can't remember which one, I flew with the group commander. We didn't have many radar, English radar sets, but the group commander always had one, and that's why I was his radio and radar operator. And, uh, now I forget your question.
- Jim: About the training—was the training adequate to do your job?
- Mel: Well, the radio was, because we grew with it before the war, you know. We didn't have—
- Jim: Did you have to know Morse code? Everything was—
- Mel: Oh yeah, oh yeah.
- Jim: Do you still remember all that?
- Mel: No! [Both laugh] The dot is "A." "Dit-dit-dit" is "S."
- Jim: When you SOS, you remember that one.
- Mel: Yeah. [Laughs]
- Jim: Right. Three longs, three shorts, then three longs, right?
- Mel: Dit-dit-dit da-da-da dit-dit-dit. [Sounding out SOS in Morse code]
- Jim: Right, okay.
- Mel: Yeah, but we didn't have much training in the radar.
- Jim: That was sort of learned on the job.
- Mel: Yeah. But it proved well for us. It was kinda elementary British stuff, but it worked well for us.
- Jim: Was it hard to learn, to—

Mel: No, no. I think that some of my eye problem today is that you're looking through a green glass day after day, and I don't know whether they ever did anything to correct that or what have you, but I know that part of my eyesight is a result of that.

Jim: All right. I think that does it.

Mel: All right.

Jim: You're a terrific interviewer. You did well.

Mel: [Laughs] Well, I did up until a couple of years ago. I did a lot of teaching for Veterans Day or various war functions [Tape ends in middle of sentence]

[End of Interview]