

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RICHARD THIEME
Fighter Pilot, Air Force, World War II.

2000

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Thieme, Richard G., (1924-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 46 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 46 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 46 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Richard G. Thieme, a Sheboygan, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a fighter pilot in Europe with the 8th Air Force Fighter Command, 339th Fighter Group, 505th Squadron. He talks about enlisting in an Aviation Cadet program, basic training at Miami Beach (Florida), college training at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, pre-flight training at Maxwell Field (Alabama), flight training at an Embry-Riddle aeronautical flying school appropriated by the military in Arcadia (Florida), basic and advanced flight school in Alabama, and gunnery school at Eglin Field (Florida). Thieme evaluates the different types of aircraft on which he trained. Transferred to Fowlmere (England) as a replacement pilot, he comments on joining the 505th Squadron, 339th Fighter Group, training in a P-51 fighter, and problems his height caused. Thieme details missions escorting bombers and flying extremely low over German airfields to destroy planes on the ground. He comments on different types of enemy aircraft and teasing P-47 pilots for having a shorter range. Thieme describes his first air combat: forgetting to switch fuel tanks, seeing tracers shoot by the front of his plane, and shaking an enemy off his tail. He speaks of the importance of altitude and recalls “porpoising” when his airplane went too fast. Once after his plane was damaged, he reports doing an emergency landing in Belgium. Thieme talks about living conditions at his base camp, including living in Nissen huts, attending Red Cross dances, and giving gifts to the local English children. He touches upon his return home for R&R, being reassigned after V-E Day, and taking his discharge. Thieme mentions attending 339th Fighter Group reunions, staying in touch with friends from the service, and being a maintenance officer in the Reserves. He comments on being an inactive member of the VFW and his civilian career. Thieme speaks of revisiting the site of his base in England, talking to the farmer who converted the air strip back into fields, the creation of a memorial there, and continued interactions between the residents of Fowlmere and the 339th Fighter Group Association.

Biographical Sketch:

Thieme (b.1924) served in the Army Air Forces from 1942 to 1945 and flew seventy missions during World War II. After the war, he entered the construction business and retired in 1989 as the president of the Sheboygan Glass Company.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed by Andrew Spaid, 2010

Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2012

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: Okay, it's 21 September, year 2000, speaking to Dick Thieme. Where were you born, sir?
- Dick: Sheboygan. Sheboygan, Wisconsin.
- Jim: Well, you didn't get very far away.
- Dick: No, no, no.
- Jim: [Laughs] When was that?
- Dick: On January 11th, 1924.
- Jim: 1-'24.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: Six months after me.
- Dick: Oh, yeah?
- Jim: Well, a little after. I was September of '23. Sheboygan. And when did you enter military service?
- Dick: November 23rd, 1942.
- Jim: You volunteered?
- Dick: Yes, I enlisted.
- Jim: Volunteered November, 1942?
- Dick: Yes.
- Jim: Yeah. 11-'42. USAF?
- Dick: Well, yeah; it was the Army at that time, but in the Air Corps—
- Jim: Right, the Air Corps, yeah.
- Dick: In the Aviation Cadets is what it actually was.
- Jim: Oh, I see. Tell me about that. You had joined as a cadet into a program that would eventually become a pilot or not?

Dick: Yes.

Jim: Depending.

Dick: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: On what; on how things went?

Dick: Yeah, yeah. But the intent was that if you failed, then you went into some other service, but you went into pilot training if you passed. I took some written exams here in town and then a physical exam down in Milwaukee, and then was accepted. And then from there on we got more tests as it went on.

Jim: Where did you go first?

Dick: To Miami Beach, Florida to basic training. We took the regular Army basic training.

Jim: Twelve weeks, was that?

Dick: I believe so.

Jim: Something like that.

Dick: It seemed like a long time. [laughs]

Jim: Kept going, right. Yeah, okay. And so then you got in towards the flying?

Dick: Oh, no. Then they sent us to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, Arkansas for some college training, and because I just graduated in June from high school.

Jim: Right. So that was directed towards what? Particularly mathematics, or—

Dick: Yeah. Mathematics and some meteorology and things like that that were—it was kind of a crash course that we had. But it was long days for—

Jim: For another how many weeks was that?

Dick: Well, we just started that program. I was only there about two months. But the idea was everyone was gonna have to spend more time there, but

because they needed a flow of cadets all the time, we were the first ones that were at the University of Arkansas.

Jim: Oh, I see.

Dick: And then we left from there and went—

Jim: Did everybody get through that course, or did they drop some then?

Dick: I think everyone got through that.

Jim: Okay. Then what?

Dick: And then we went to Nashville, which was a classification center. And there they did a whole lot of other tests: psychological, and, ah—

Jim: Decide which direction they were going to point you, and then—

Dick: Well, whether you were going to be a pilot or a bombardier or a navigator, yes.

Jim: And those are based on what? Can you recall specifically what skills put you in one direction versus another?

Dick: Well, I don't—you had to be, ah—

Jim: Hand-eye coordination type?

Dick: Yeah, for—

Jim: Oh, really?

Dick: And, ah, what do you call it? Reaction time, that they tested your reaction time.

Jim: Reflexes?

Dick: Reflexes and all that sort of stuff. And you had to meet a psychologist—or a psychiatrist.

Jim: Oh, really?

Dick: And then you just hoped that everything was all right. They don't tell you that much. [laughs]

Jim: Tell you that you were [unintelligible] for a little bit.

- Dick: Yeah. [Jim laughs] And then from there we went to Maxwell Field at Montgomery, Alabama.
- Jim: Right. And then you were in the direction for a pilot?
- Dick: That was called a pre-flight school there. And that was all ground school at Maxwell Field.
- Jim: No Piper Cubs?
- Dick: No, no Piper Cubs. I think that came later, but we didn't have any at that time. And then after that I went to Arcadia, Florida to—it was an Embry-Riddle aeronautical flying school that the military had taken over, and we flew Stearman airplanes. It was a biplane.
- Jim: Oh, yes. I know the Stearman.
- Dick: PT-17.
- Jim: 17, yeah.
- Dick: That's where we learned to fly. It was called Primary Flying School.
- Jim: Right. So you never stopped at the Piper Cub stage?
- Dick: No, no.
- Jim: You went right to Stearmans?
- Dick: Yes, uh-huh.
- Jim: That's basic, then.
- Dick: Yeah. No, that was *primary* flight.
- Jim: That was primary?
- Dick: And then we went back up to Gunter Field—Gunter Field at Montgomery, Alabama, and there we flew the Vultee—well, we called it the “Vultee Vibrator.” It was the BT-13. It was a low-wing monoplane. And that was called “Basic Flying School.” And then to Selma, Alabama, for Advanced Flying School.
- Jim: Were many guys dropped in those two schools?

Dick: Yes, quite a few.

Jim: I mean more than half?

Dick: No, I wouldn't say more than half. But I would say—

Jim: Maybe forty percent, or maybe sixty—

Dick: I would say about a third. I would think that—

Jim: Were lost in each of those two steps?

Dick: Yes, uh-huh.

Jim: Okay. And now you're getting down to an elite group, here.

Dick: Yes. [laughs]

Jim: Right.

Dick: And then we went to Selma, Alabama and flew the AT-6s. And then—

Jim: That's the favorite airplane of everyone who is a single pilot.

Dick: Yeah. That was a nice handling airplane.

Jim: Everybody likes that. And you know that so many of them go to EAA [Experimental Aircraft Association]. That's probably the most popular airplane there, isn't it?

Dick: Yeah, yeah. Well, I always felt North American built all good airplanes. They were a pilot's airplane, you know.

Jim: Yeah. Right. So everybody liked the AT-6?

Dick: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Right. And how long would spend with that? Would you say about six months, or not that long?

Dick: Well, and then we graduated on February 8th, 1944. That's when we—and then we were commissioned. Then we got our wings. From there we went to Eglin Field down in Florida and had some gunnery school in AT-6s. And then we went to Perry, Florida and flew P-40s. And that was our first—well we had, I think, ten hours or something of flying P-40s right before we graduated from Selma.

- Jim: How did we like the P-40s?
- Dick: Well, we thought it was great at the time, but after you flew a P-51—
- Jim: Something that had a lot of power, and then they looked back and it wasn't much, was it?
- Dick: Well, no. But it was a *difficult* airplane to fly, as opposed to the P-51, because there were so many mechanical operations you had to, ah—
- Jim: Oh really?
- Dick: When you took off, one gear came up first. And then, you know, you were fighting the airplane, and then the other one came up, and then you—
- Jim: You were fighting the torque all the time?
- Dick: Because the one gear would be dragging.
- Jim: Sure.
- Dick: And then you had to pump to lock the wheels up. And when you operated the scoop, if you were at high speed, it was like the old emergency brakes used to be on cars: you squeezed it and would jam your arm up, or else you couldn't hardly push it down. [laughs]
- Jim: Yeah.
- Dick: And then the P-51, it was just a matter of—
- Jim: It was an automatic, that one.
- Dick: —flipping some switches, you know. [laughs]
- Jim: It was electric then?
- Dick: Yes, uh-huh. Or hydraulic, some of it was.
- Jim: Probably.
- Dick: It all was controlled just by—
- Jim: But otherwise the P-40 was reasonably stable while flying?
- Dick: Yeah. It had a narrow landing gear.

Jim: That's the other thing. Other pilots have mentioned that.

Dick: Yeah.

Jim: That they had trouble landing that because they said they were afraid it was going to break.

Dick: Well, and you had to be careful if there was the least little crosswind so you didn't ground-loop. You know, because the P-51, again, had a wider stance on the ground.

Jim: More stability, then?

Dick: Yeah. And at Perry, then we flew formation and gunnery, and—

Jim: In the '51?

Dick: No, all in P-40s.

Jim: Oh, P-40s. Okay.

Dick: And then we went to Tallahassee, Florida. That was some staging center or something, and we got all our records up to date and what-not-all. And then—

Jim: That's when you formed into a squadron?

Dick: Well, no, I was—

Jim: Not then?

Dick: What we were into was what they called "RTUs", replacement training units. So we went over as replacement pilots.

Jim: Without any assignment particularly until you got there, right?

Dick: Right. Yeah.

Jim: How did you get over—you went to Europe, or—

Dick: Yes.

Jim: —to the Pacific? Europe?

- Dick: Europe. We went to New York, and then flew out of LaGuardia to Prestwick, Scotland, and then—
- Jim: In what?
- Dick: In a C-54.
- Jim: Right. About six or ten of you, or twenty of you, or so?
- Dick: Well—
- Jim: There probably was a mixture there.
- Dick: Yeah. Well we had about half freight in the thing, and then the rest were all new pilots that were going over.
- Jim: So you ended up in England?
- Dick: In England, yes, at a place called “Stone.” And that’s where everyone came over there, and then while they got you—always some more looking over your records and then they published the various groups and how many pilots they needed. And we had five of us that had gone all through training together and we decided we would like to stay together in the same unit. So there were some—well, like the fourth group, that was the old Eagle Squadron, and they were hotshots. Well somebody else grabbed onto those right away and we kinda waited around wherever there was a place for five, and we ended up with the 339th.
- Jim: The what?
- Dick: 339th Fighter—
- Jim: 339th or two?
- Dick: Three. Three-three-nine.
- Jim: Three-three-nine squadron or group?
- Dick: Fighter group.
- Jim: Three-three-nine.
- Dick: And we ended up in the 505th Squadron of the 339th Fighter Group.
- Jim: Five-O-five squadron?

- Dick: Yeah, uh-huh. And I'll never forget when we got there, we met the colonel, base commander or the group commander was on a mission and we had to wait for him to come back. And then we introduced ourselves, and he said, "And how much P-51 time have you got?" And we had one clown in our group and he said, "Well, we saw one once," he said. [both laugh] And he said, "Oh, my." I could just see his face—
- Jim: Right. His face dropped.
- Dick: [Laughs] So then he sent us up to a place called—up on the Humber River. What was it? Hull.
- Jim: That's where your base was?
- Dick: No. We were at Fowlmere, which is about seven miles south of Cambridge.
- Jim: I went through there on a train last year, going to Cambridge. Because I went up to Duxford to see that gorgeous museum there.
- Dick: Yeah, we were only about two miles from Duxford.
- Jim: Right. Now I know where you were.
- Dick: Oh, okay. Yeah. And then up at Hull, they had a bunch of, well, what they called "war worry" airplanes, planes that had been damaged but they were still flyable, but not in combat.
- Jim: They're good for practice.
- Dick: And we found out after while the instructors were all people that got Channel fever after while, they'd always find something wrong so they wouldn't have to go on a mission. So rather than send—
- Jim: Oh, they found something wrong with their airplane so they could go home?
- Dick: Yeah. So, ah—
- Jim: That was what they called "Channel fever?"
- Dick: Yeah. [laughs] And then we got about ten hours of flying time in the P-51 up there.
- Jim: That was your first?

- Dick: Yes, uh-huh. And then we went back to the unit. And then for, I think, three different days after the mission came back, then several of the pilots would take us out and fly some formation with us and show us how the group and the squadron activated.
- Jim: Your basic unit to fly with was a group of five or six aircraft, or more?
- Dick: Well, in a fighter squadron, I think there's either supposed to be twenty-four or twenty-five pilots are assigned and aircraft. And you put up the unit of—well, the basic unit is an element, that's two ships, but a formation is a flight of four. And then there's as many of them as you have airplanes to put up there; there's a red flight, a white flight, and a blue flight, and a green flight.
- Jim: Each with about four in it?
- Dick: Every one has four, yes.
- Jim: Right. That's the basic unit. That's what I was getting at.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: Because I interviewed a P-47 fella yesterday.
- Dick: Oh, okay.
- Jim: And I'm trying to get the difference, because their formations were essentially just like yours.
- Dick: Yeah, I think that was the standard Air Corps formation.
- Jim: Now before we get further, tell me about your feeling about the 51, as you jumped to a 51. Was that a big surprise?
- Dick: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: The sudden power—did—
- Dick: Well it had more power and more performance.
- Jim: It did everything better?
- Dick: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Because jumping from a P-40 to that is quite a step, wouldn't you say?

- Dick: Yeah. Well, I don't know if even power-wise—I think the power wasn't even that much more, but it was just that it performed so much better. And it was so much more comfortable—easier to fly.
- Jim: Comfortable. Now—
- Dick: Well, I meant as far as handling used to be.
- Jim: I'm sure it's [unintelligible]. Cause you're cinched right in there to that seat, I know that.
- Dick: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: So there wasn't a lot of comfort room there in that '51.
- Dick: No, no.
- Jim: It was a squeeze.
- Dick: Yeah, that was a—well, that was another problem. I've gotta tell you that story. After you finished your basic flying school in Gunter Field, then you either go to twin engine advanced flying school or single engine advanced. So then we had to take another physical and some more examinations and things, and then finally we had to meet with the flight surgeon at the very last. And we could suggest what we'd like to do, but it was up to the service to assign us. And I had said I always, from the time I enlisted, I thought I wanted to be a fighter pilot. And he said, "I see you want to be a fighter pilot." And I said, "Yes, I would." And then he said, "Well," he said "we got a little problem." And I says, "Yeah, what's that?" And he says, "Well," he said "I'm not allowed to assign anyone to a single engine that's over six feet tall." And then he paged around on some papers, and he hummed around a little bit, and finally he said, "You *really* want to be a fighter pilot?" And then I said, "Yes, sir. That's what I really would like to be." And he said, "Let's measure you one more time," he said. [both laugh] And he stood me up there—
- Jim: You crouched, right?
- Dick: And he whopped that thing down on my head and he said, "Boy," he said, "you're just six feet. You just made it," he said. [laughs]
- Jim: Oh, that was nice. That was nice of him.
- Dick: Yeah. But I paid a little price for that, because we sat on a dinghy, and we were supposed to have a little cushion on that dinghy and I couldn't have a cushion on my dinghy. And that dinghy—

- Jim: Otherwise you wouldn't fit with the canopy closed?
- Dick: Well, yeah, I was little too tall. So that was a little hard to sit on. [laughs]
- Jim: So the reason they didn't want over six footers was a good one?
- Dick: Yeah, yeah. There was a reason for it. [both laugh]
- Jim: Oh, that's cute. Okay. And so tell me about your first experience in combat now. You flew from England—
- Dick: Yes. Yeah.
- Jim: —and flying cover, was that your main job?
- Dick: Well half, yes. See, we were in the 8th Air Force, and the 8th Air Force is a strategic—that's to destroy the enemy's ability to wage war.
- Jim: You were supporting the bombers. Right.
- Dick: So we were working way back in there. So we'd have a red and white flight, and yellow if we had that many airplanes. And then the blue and green, that was the other—we split into a red section and a blue section even as we were escorting. And then after the bombs were away, then the red flight stayed with the bombers and nursed them back to base, picked up the stragglers and what-not-all. And the blue flight went down on the deck and strafed. And that's where we lost all our pilots was in—
- Jim: Close to that anti-aircraft fire?
- Dick: Yeah. Well trying to destroy the Luftwaffe on the ground. And, boy, they had some of those airfields that they really had those things heated up for—you know, it was just like the fourth of July.
- Jim: The “triple A.”
- Dick: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Right. Just a *sheet* of metal that you had to fly through, really.
- Dick: Yeah. Well, you've gotta be right down on the deck, because you want the guys on this side to be shootin' at the guys on this side, and you're gonna be going through the middle. [laughs] And sometimes, whenever you fired the guns, there was a camera that automatically was filming, and every once in a while they'd see some stuff flying up in there and

somebody was picking up a little grass or something, that's how low they were. [laughs]

Jim: Oh, my. Oh, my.

Dick: But it was a matter of, if you were—

Jim: But that was the only chance of getting away with that?

Dick: Oh, otherwise they'd blow you right out of the sky. You had to—

Jim: If you had any altitude at all, they'd be—

Dick: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Because they could see you coming in, or they had a better angle then?

Dick: Well, you'd try to set up a mission—ideal situation, you try to come in out of the sun and into the wind, unless the wind is too strong, so that you can get as much element of surprise as you can. But sometimes, because of the terrain around there or something, it doesn't always work. But that would be ideal. That's what—

Jim: "Into the wind" meaning so the noise of the airplane wouldn't be picked up as soon?

Dick: Right. So that you could get—

Jim: There's one thing I'd never heard before. That's very good.

Dick: Oh. That's what we always tried to do, unless the wind was too strong that it was slowing us up too much. Because we were losing so many pilots, and then our commander finally said, "You know, we just can't go on this way." And he said, "So from now on, if you're not going across on the first pass at four seventy-five, we're not gonna do it," he said. So we'd get out quite a ways, and then start a dive to really pick up some speed and then go across.

Jim: You went across at what, twenty feet, thirty feet, fifty feet?

Dick: Oh, yeah. Ten, twenty feet I would say. You're right down on the ground.

Jim: The closer you are, the better you are off?

Dick: The safer you are, yes.

- Jim: Well, coming in at four seventy-five, that ought to get you over that airfield pretty fast.
- Dick: Oh yeah. But you don't have much time to make any decisions or to shoot either, because, see, the guns are bore-sighted at three hundred yards. They hit in a twelve-inch circle, and if you fire before that—
- Jim: All eight guns?
- Dick: Six. We only had six in the P-51, three in each wing. The P-40 had eight.
- Jim: The P-47 too.
- Dick: P-47 I mean, yeah. And, ah, we only had six. But—
- Jim: You sighted at three hundred yards, so you had to pick out something right quick.
- Dick: Yeah, well, if you fire before that, you just don't have the concentration. First of all, you're firing one way, and you know, you're crossing over, so—
- Jim: Your main objective on the airfield was to destroy planes on the ground, right?
- Dick: Yeah, right.
- Jim: Any 262s there?
- Dick: Ah, no.
- Jim: You never had a chance to go up against any of those?
- Dick: I didn't, no. But we—ah, one or two of our fellows shot those down. When we first saw those, we thought, boy, this is gonna be the end, because we had a gyro gunfight that came out. First we started out with just the plain fixed hundred mil ring, and then they came out with a gyro sight that we, on our throttle we could turn it and there were a series of blips that this was projected in front of you on a piece of glass. And if you just got the airplane in that blip and kept it in there, and then the gyro automatically compensated to give you the lead that you needed, because that's one of the things that's always difficult to judge how far, how much lead that you needed.
- Jim: I understand. That made it a lot easier, then?

- Dick: Yeah. And a couple times I was gonna take a shot at a 262, but he'd turn on the heat and you'd just turn that thing all the way over and he just took off. [laughs]
- Jim: He was gone.
- Dick: He was gone. And out of range, they were just—
- Jim: I have a friend in Madison, Cliff Bauer, who flew 51s. He shot down one of those 262s.
- Dick: Oh.
- Jim: I accused him of ground-swatting it. But he said, "No, I shot him in the air." But I said I know [unintelligible, talking at the same time].
- Dick: Well, some of the guys got some in the landing pattern, and one of our fellows got one in a just a full deflection shot. He took a shot at him and—
- Jim: Oh, that was pure luck.
- Dick: Yeah, he admits it! [laughs] He said, "I pulled the trigger," and he said—
- Jim: And there he was! He ran into the bullets. [both laugh] Oh yeah. But those are scary, aren't they?
- Dick: Yeah, yeah. Well, we thought, "Boy, if they got too many of these, we're gonna be in trouble." [laughs]
- Jim: They could go past you just in a shot.
- Dick: Yeah. Well really the first thing we encountered, though, was that 163. That was that—
- Jim: What, a Comet?
- Dick: Yeah. And that would thing would go, you know, straight on up.
- Jim: That was a bizarre airplane.
- Dick: That was a rocket.
- Jim: Yeah, it really was a rocket, wasn't it?

- Dick: And they could turn that on. But they only had—I don't know—not very much time to fly, but—
- Jim: Just a few minutes to fly.
- Dick: They'd go way up high, and then they were actually gliding. And then when they got down too low, then they'd hit that rocket and, you know, climb up. They would go straight up. And that thing took off on a dolly.
- Jim: Right, and then dropped the dolly.
- Dick: And then landed on its belly after while, yeah.
- Jim: It was a most impractical thing, that.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: Really an experimental airplane.
- Dick: But I think that if the German air force would have—I guess Hitler was always trying to—
- Jim: He didn't want that kind of an airplane.
- Dick: No, he wanted to bomb Britain, I guess, and he spent too much time building bombers. And if he'd have spent more time building fighters—
- Jim: Our good luck.
- Dick: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.
- Jim: 'Cause they were way ahead of us in the development of jet power.
- Dick: Right. Right.
- Jim: Did you do any bombing with that 51?
- Dick: No. No.
- Jim: Because a few guys did some, but not much.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: You had to just hang them on the wings, and it wasn't much.
- Dick: Yeah. Well see, we hung a hundred and ten gallons of fuel under—

- Jim: Yeah, you had those drop tanks.
- Dick: Yeah. Because see that's where—they were changing all the units over from the P-47 to the P-51 because of the range.
- Jim: Right. Because you could cover the bombers all the way over and all the way back. Right.
- Dick: Yeah. When I first come over there, then they would always needle these guys. Duxford had a group of P-47s over there. And we'd meet 'em in the pub or something, and they'd always go, "Well, you guys turn around and go home when the war starts." [laughs]
- Jim: You chicken out, right.
- Dick: Because it really used fuel.
- Jim: Well that engine was so *huge*.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: You know, it was not a very economical engine.
- Dick: Oh no. I think there was—
- Jim: But on the other hand, the guy I talked to yesterday in Appleton said on one mission he carried two one thousand pound bombs and got, you know—picked up and got off the ground with that. Now that's a hell of a load for a single engine airplane.
- Dick: Oh yeah, and that airplane—
- Jim: That's power.
- Dick: —was in a different class, too, as far as, like the 9th Air Force was using a lot of them, and they were tactical, interdicting the battle line, and ah, they could—
- Jim: That's what he did a lot of.
- Dick: Oh. And they could get a cylinder head knocked off or something and that thing kept on running, where we had way too much plumbing. See, we were a liquid-cooled engine and you had that radiator back in the scoop there, and you were vulnerable for a ground fighter compared to a P-47. But they just didn't have—they would have been—

- Jim: Yeah, he said the plane frequently got shot up. But he said that being air-cooled, he got away with it. And this one time he had to land in a British air base in France, because the plane simply wouldn't get back. And he said they looked over the airplane, which was really chopped up, and they said, "It's a good thing this wasn't a Spitfire," he said, "you'd have never made it," because that Spitfire was—that was liquid cooled, too—he said, "You'd have been down."
- Dick: They had the same engine that the P-51 had in it, that old Rolls Royce Merlin.
- Jim: Merlin, yes.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: And air combat; tell me your experience with that.
- Dick: Well, I'll tell you my first experience with a German airplane. That was on my third mission, and that was the first time I saw a German airplane in the air. And somebody hollered, you know—
- Jim: [unintelligible]
- Dick: No, "Drop the tanks." That's the first thing you gotta do is when you're [unintelligible]. You're too, you know, not maneuverable enough. So okay, boy I was kind of excited, you know, and I hit the button on top of the stick and dropped the tanks. And these German airplanes were coming in, and everybody was turning into them, and all of a sudden "brrrr." [laughs] My prop stopped. I forgot to switch tanks. [laughs]
- Jim: Oh my. Bad time to run out of gas. So you're—my, my, my. Wow.
- Dick: So when I finally got the thing air started, and then I—well, a couple of guys took a shot at me, but they misjudged. They didn't think I could possibly be going that slow. I could see their—[laughs]
- Jim: [Laughs] Geez, you had a new tactic developed.
- Dick: Yeah. I could see the tracers goin' across in front of me, but I wasn't there yet.
- Jim: Yeah, just stop the plane for a second and they'll be past. Right.
- Dick: Yeah. But then I got a guy on my tail and I just couldn't get rid of the fellow, but I could keep turning tight enough that he couldn't pull a lead

on me to take a good shot. But, then, you know, I'm thinking, "I can't keep going around here in circles forever."

Jim: You gotta do something, yeah.

Dick: I gotta do something. So I finally put the thing in a real steep dive, just turning as fast as I could. And I'm going straight down, and I don't see no tracers, so he's not shootin' at me. Then all of a sudden, I think, "Boy, I'm gettin' real close to the ground." [laughs] And I pull that thing back, and the G-suit blew up and everything. And I just pulled out right off the ground, and this guy went—[laughs]

Jim: He overdid it?

Dick: Yeah.

Jim: There's a new technique right there.

Dick: [Laughs] Yeah, but it's a little risky. [laughs]

Jim: [Laughs] Yeah, it can go both ways.

Dick: Yeah, yeah. So that was my first experience with, ah—

Jim: Well, he was so intent on you that he didn't pull up.

Dick: Yeah, that's what I think must have happened. Yeah. Because I say, and I don't think they had a G-suit, either. Ah, he might have—

Jim: Oh well, that could have—he might have momentarily [unintelligible].

Dick: Yeah. He might have blacked out or something, you know, as he was pulling out and he didn't make it.

Jim: Was that a 109?

Dick: Yes. Yes. That was up around, near Arnhem in Holland—in that Holland area.

Jim: Alright. And what else?

Dick: Well, the rest was all—

Jim: Any other experiences with German fighters?

Dick: Yeah, periodically.

Jim: Did you ever go up against the Focke-Wulf?

Dick: The 190. Yes. Yeah.

Jim: That was a pretty good airplane.

Dick: Yeah. But I never shot one of those down. I got some shots at it, but I never got [unintelligible].

Jim: They didn't come at you with anything that you recall?

Dick: Oh yeah.

Jim: But they were too far away or just weren't accurate enough to damage your plane?

Dick: Yeah, right. They would be attacking bombers and we would try to drive them off.

Jim: Drive them away?

Dick: Yes. We always tried to be above them and high in the sun, over the planes.

Jim: That's what I was going to get to next. Your mission was essentially to stay above the bombers?

Dick: Yes.

Jim: Because the danger from opposing fighters came from above, rather than below?

Dick: Yeah, it seemed like no matter how high we were, they always were higher. I don't know how they did it, but I just—

Jim: They were waiting for you. They didn't have to come eight hundred miles first.

Dick: Yeah, that might have been, but, ah—

Jim: Sure, they had time to get up there.

Dick: Uh-huh. And I think they also used the—you know you can turn altitude into speed, and I think that's why they attacked from above, too, so that they could be running at higher speeds when they attacked the bombers.

- Jim: Right. Were there any limits set on your plane that you were not—**[End of Tape One, Side One]**—to exceed in speed?
- Dick: Yeah, well—
- Jim: Where they said, “Don’t do this, or the wings will come off,” or something?
- Dick: Well, no, not really. But if you get—
- Jim: It red-lined at something, though.
- Dick: Yeah, but we never bothered to red-line. But you could tell, ah, like—I remember one day somebody hollered, “There’s a bandit at six o’clock low.” And everybody was—you know, we rolled over and well, we just had a flight of four. But, ah, all of a sudden you hit compressibility when you’re at high altitude and goin’ straight down with full-throttle and then the P-51 started to—we called it *porpoising*—before you—
- Jim: It would start hopping up like a porpoise?
- Dick: Well yeah, that you couldn’t—instead of being steady in the air, it’d start—and that was the signal you’d better back off, because now you’re—
- Jim: If you exceeded your speed then, you’d lose control of it completely?
- Dick: Well, yeah. Guys, I guess, tore—the wings started, you know, they tore the rivet holes—or all the rivet holes got loose and everything.
- Jim: Airplane’s working wrong.
- Dick: I don’t know if they ever come off. But they had some that you could take the end of the wings and move them up and down. They were junk really, after a while, because that airplane just wouldn’t go through the speed of sound, which is seven-something, I forget.
- Jim: [unintelligible]
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: So, how many missions did you have?
- Dick: Seventy.
- Jim: Seventy?

- Dick: Yes.
- Jim: Was there any limit set before they would send you home that you knew about, that everybody said, “Well, if you get that many missions—” like the bombers had twenty-five or thirty.
- Dick: Yeah. Well, I think we had, if I’m not mistaken, it was three hundred hours of—
- Jim: Oh, after three hundred hours, you had a chance to be, what, sent home?
- Dick: Yes. Yeah. Well, you were sent to R and R, rest and return, is what it was.
- Jim: Three hundred hours, you get R and R. Okay. But you still would come back to the base and you’d still have to fly?
- Dick: Yeah. That was the idea, yes. But I—
- Jim: Nothing like the bomber crew, who were sent home after twenty-five missions?
- Dick: No. No. And when I finished my missions—that was in March of 1945—and then I came back to here to Sheboygan and meanwhile the war in Europe—
- Jim: While you here, the war in Europe was over.
- Dick: I was on my leave and then I got a wire that I should go, instead of reporting back to New Jersey, I should go to Santa Ana, California. I thought I was going to go out to the West Coast, but it was a re-classification.
- Jim: They weren’t setting you up to go to Japan?
- Dick: No, evidently not, because then meanwhile they came out with a point system. If you had spent—
- Jim: For getting discharged, right.
- Dick: Yeah, for so much time. And then I wanted to have a flying assignment, and they said there was no flying, they didn’t have any flying assignments. And, so, well what’s my alternative? Well, you can either take a ground job or take your points and go home. So I took my points and went home. [laughs]

- Jim: Sure. Most certainly. You stretched your luck long enough.
- Dick: Yeah. I got home in August in 1945. Well then, I think two weeks after that or something, the war was over in Japan.
- Jim: Did you ever have damage enough where it was difficult to get back to your base in England?
- Dick: Yeah. I slid one in in Belgium at one point.
- Jim: Oh, you couldn't get back to England?
- Dick: Yeah, right.
- Jim: What was damaged? The wings damaged?
- Dick: I think I got hit in the scoop and I was losing—my engine just overheated after a while. And I—
- Jim: So it would have seized and stopped completely then?
- Dick: Yeah. Well, I could see smoke starting to come out of the stacks, and that's a sign that it's not long for this world anymore. [laughs] And I was just trying to make it across the British—
- Jim: So you just radioed into the airfield; was that an airbase?
- Dick: Oh no, this was just out in the country. Ah, I knew I was real close to the lines, and that was why I was trying to keep the thing flying as long as I could. And then I slid into a field—just on the belly—and then the first thing you were supposed to do was crawl in some—you know, get in some place and get your wits about you before you did anything dumb, so I crawled in a culvert. And, ah—
- Jim: You weren't sure whether you were on the right side of the line?
- Dick: No. I knew *about* where I was, but I wasn't sure. And then all of a sudden I heard some equipment running on the road, and I looked and it was British. And then so I went out and—
- Jim: Waved at them?
- Dick: Yeah. And then they took me in to—
- Jim: And then where'd they take you?

Dick: To Sint-Truiden, Belgium.

Jim: And then you had to get back to England some way?

Dick: Yeah. Get a ride back to England, yeah.

Jim: Another plane ride, or—

Dick: Yeah. Yeah. It was a C-47 that was just running back and forth.

Jim: Alright. Now when you got back, they had you marked as missing?

Dick: Ah, I assume so, yeah.

Jim: Okay. Because you were gone for, what, a couple of days? Or just a day?

Dick: No, just a—I think a day later or something I was back to England.

Jim: Well maybe your mates had seen you go down and to land, or did they?

Dick: No, I was alone. We got separated at the time.

Jim: Oh, so they didn't know whether had you made it or not?

Dick: No. No.

Jim: Well, I'm sure they were glad to see ya.

Dick: Yeah, it was a nice feeling! [laughs]

Jim: Yeah, "Where the hell ya been? We all came back and you weren't there." [laughs] Oh, that's nice, yeah. Your accommodations at your airfield in England were good?

Dick: Well, ah—

Jim: Reasonable mess hall? And the food was *okay*, or—

Dick: Yeah, well, we had, I think they call them "garrison rations." But when I came back, I came back on a troop ship. And—what was it? It says "*Mount Vernon*." I think it was the *Washington*, or something; it was a civilian liner that the Army had taken over. But we ate better on that boat than we did [laughs] on our base. And we lived in these Nissen huts. Eight people—

- Jim: To a Nissen hut, yeah.
- Dick: —to a hut, yeah. And they were kinda cold and damp. But we—
- Jim: Yeah, it's kinda chilly there.
- Dick: Yeah. Well, and there's only, you know—what is it?—a sixteenth of an inch between you and the outside, and that corrugated metal and—
- Jim: No insulation at all.
- Dick: No. So we ultimately insulated it with—the drop tanks that we got came in plywood boxes, eighth-inch plywood boxes, and then they had a heavier wood frame around the outside and we took that off, and then we'd screw that onto those—
- Jim: Inside of the Nissen?
- Dick: Yeah. Yeah.
- Jim: Did your five guys stay together?
- Dick: Yes. Well, yeah, we lost two of them. Two were killed of the five of us. And one fella was transferred—one of the other groups, I forget which one it is, had lost a bunch of their people and then he asked some of the other groups to send some experienced people so they wouldn't have, you know—
- Jim: Right; all new guys.
- Dick: —all new guys. And then he took a—he was a flight officer, which I never did understand that, but it's—
- Jim: Sort of halfway between enlisted and—
- Dick: Yeah, well, it's a warrant really.
- Jim: It's a warrant officer, right.
- Dick: And you have to get promoted from a warrant to a second lieutenant. And of course, all the replacements that are coming in are all second lieutenants. So it's darned tough to get promoted to second lieutenant!
[laughs]
- Jim: Right.

- Dick: So that's why our commander offered me a transfer to get to a new place while their T.O. was open, so he could get promoted. And then from there—
- Jim: So did you keep track of him after the war?
- Dick: Yeah. Yeah.
- Jim: He still alive?
- Dick: Yeah. Yeah. He—
- Jim: Where does he live?
- Dick: I don't know where he lives. But we have a reunion every year.
- Jim: With the squadron, or—
- Dick: With the group. This year—next month in fact—we're gonna be in San Anton'. And we go to different parts of the United States. Since most of the fellas are retired, we've been going the last five—
- Jim: On a yearly basis?
- Dick: Yeah. Yeah.
- Jim: Okay. And the other two guys, of the three that were left, are they still around?
- Dick: Yes, uh-huh. One became an optometrist up in Superior [Wisconsin], a fella by the name of Ed Gursing. And Bob Erien[?] is in Salt Lake City now. He became a vice president of the Union Pacific Railroad.
- Jim: Oh my goodness.
- Dick: And, ah, who was the other one? Where is he now, I'm trying to think. Cecil Bird is in Upper Michigan. Or the upper part of lower Michigan.
- Jim: Do you correspond with these fellas?
- Dick: Yeah; well we used to send each other a Christmas card and a note, and then we'd get together at the reunion.
- Jim: Sure. Well that's really nice, yeah. What kind of medals did you earn? Air Medal, for sure.

- Dick: Yeah. I got the Air Medal with seven clusters.
- Jim: Air Medal with *seven* clusters. Oh, you're the first one with seven.
- Dick: Oh, okay. [Jim laughs] And the Distinguished Flying Cross, and then the Presidential Unit Citation. And—what was it?—the European Theatre with those battle stars—
- Jim: All the standard stuff, sure.
- Dick: —stuff like that, yeah. And—
- Jim: Well, that Flying Cross is very good. Not everyone got those.
- Dick: No, I don't think so. No.
- Jim: No. You didn't have any MIGs to your credit?
- Dick: No.
- Jim: No? [laughs]
- Dick: That was the last flying that I did. Well, I stayed in the Reserve and I flew some AT-6s after a while, but then later on I transferred into maintenance, and I was a maintenance officer.
- Jim: You didn't keep up your flying at all, afterwards? After the war?
- Dick: Not for—only a couple of years after for the military. And then I got married and I had made a mistake, really; it turned out you could get a commercial pilot's license just by going down to the FAA in Milwaukee. And I go, "Oh, this is great." But the only problem with that was I had to go Milwaukee and get a flight—certain kind of flight surgeon, or whatever it was, to give me an exam and he charged an arm and a leg for that.
- Jim: Oh really?
- Dick: And I should have taken a private pilot's license. But you know, you're a big hot pilot and you wanna make— [laughs]
- Jim: Sure.
- Dick: So after we got married and we were building a house and all that stuff, and you start to look at bucks, and that's why the only flying I did then was in the military where I didn't need a license. [laughs]

Jim: But you enjoyed it, and you survived it, so—

Dick: Oh yeah, sure.

Jim: You really enjoyed flying?

Dick: Yeah. Oh, it's a great experience.

Jim: Do you get up to the EAA often?

Dick: Yeah, I was up there this year again. I usually go up there and look at all the war birds.

Jim: Sure. I have to go to Oshkosh tomorrow. How long does it take to get there? A couple hours?

Dick: I would say an hour and fifteen minutes.

Jim: That's all?

Dick: Yeah.

Jim: You take that state road over, not the—

Dick: Highway 23. That's probably the one you came in on.

Jim: [Laughs] Sure.

Dick: That'll take you right over to Fond du Lac and then up 41.

Jim: To 41?

Dick: Yeah.

Jim: Not the freeway, 43, but the regular state road 41 goes—on the map it's a straighter shot on 41, rather than the freeway.

Dick: Yeah, and you been there, you've seen that it's right off of 41.

Jim: Oh yeah. Right. Okay, well that's good to know. And did you join any veterans' groups after the war?

Dick: Yeah, the VFW. Then I was active in that for—I was an Adjutant and then a Quartermaster and what-not-all, and then finally, as the family—and I got busy working, I didn't do anything.

- Jim: Well, it didn't seem to have as much purpose after the war, right?
- Dick: No. And then finally, about two years ago, I rejoined. But now I don't belong to a post, a local post, I'm just post 1400 or something, the national organization, and I pay dues into it.
- Jim: And did you use your G.I Bill at all?
- Dick: No. I never used it.
- Jim: You never had any reason to use it, or—
- Dick: No. No. I just never used it.
- Jim: So you came back home and got married, and then tell me what kind of work you did.
- Dick: Well, I started out doing some drafting. And then I got into, ah—I've been in the construction business in different phases of it. I did estimating and ultimately became of the president of Sheboygan Glass Company and ran that for twenty years.
- Jim: Oh, that's great.
- Dick: And before that I had run it as the so-called executive vice president because the owner spent his whole winters in Arizona, and I was running it then.
- Jim: Well, those are important jobs.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: They retired you, and—
- Dick: I retired in 1989. Then they asked me to stay on for the transition, so for three years I worked mornings after that, just for part time, kind of let myself down gradually.
- Jim: Sure. Get into it gradually. You ever had a chance to fly any of the jets, then?
- Dick: No. No. Except as a passenger.
- Jim: Yeah, right. Alright, sir. I can't think of anything else, unless there's something you forgot to tell me.

- Dick: No, not that I know of.
- Jim: Well, you managed to get through unscathed, and no one, you know, wounded you, and that was very lucky.
- Dick: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, we always talked about our guardian angels.
- Jim: Oh, I'm sure.
- Dick: Everybody believed they had a guardian angel.
- Jim: Was your base visited by USO troops? Ever see any of them?
- Dick: No. Not that I—
- Jim: See any of the Red Cross or the Salvation Army there?
- Dick: Yeah. We had two Red Cross girls that were assigned to our base.
- Jim: What would they do?
- Dick: Well, ah, they would arrange dances for, you know, for the troops in the evening.
- Jim: Where would those be held? In a hanger?
- Dick: No. Our hangar was open ended. We didn't have a closed hangar. We just had a, like a big Quonset hut, but it was open on each end. But in the group headquarters section there was a couple of big buildings and they had an NCO club, and we had one hut that was an officer's club there, but—they were small, but they would arrange different social functions and try to keep people active.
- Jim: Sure. Did dances bring some British girls in to dance with?
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: How'd that work out?
- Dick: All right, I guess. I don't know how they got them in there. Every night from our base there was what they called the 'liberty run.' A couple of six by sixes would haul people into Cambridge and then drop them off and then bring them back about ten o'clock at night, or something like that, and bring them back.
- Jim: And these were just for enlisted men?

- Dick: Either.
- Jim: Either. Officers, too?
- Dick: Yeah. Whoever wanted to get on could get a ride into town and get a ride back again. And then we were all assigned bicycles.
- Jim: Oh really?
- Dick: Yeah, so.
- Jim: Just for running around the base, or to go further?
- Dick: Well, yeah, because the base—everything was dispersed on the base, with the living area in one place, and the headquarters in another, and the mess hall, and the operations and so there was some considerable distance— [tape cuts out]—all these little towns.
- Jim: All of them?
- Dick: Check out the pubs, you know. [laughs]
- Jim: And the girls?
- Dick: Well. [laughs]
- Jim: Well, the girls were friendly, weren't they? Didn't you bring your chocolate and your nylon stockings and all that, and cigarettes for them?
- Dick: Well, no. What we did mostly was, ah—we had to go through a little part of the village to get from our mess hall to our barracks. And we'd get some fruit once in a while and then there was kids that we got know, that were playing around there. And if we could appropriate some extra oranges, or apples, or something, then we'd get some and give them to the kids. Well at Christmas we all pooled in some of our candy and had a Christmas party for them, and stuff like that, so—
- Jim: Oh, that was fun.
- Dick: —a couple of years ago, we've been back as a group, back over to the base twice. It's now a thirteen hundred acre farm—or they don't call them farms over—
- Jim: They tear up all the concrete?

- Dick: It never was concrete. All we had was steel matting—
- Jim: Oh, really?
- Dick: —with these holes in it, you know?
- Jim: Oh, then it was easy to transfer it back into farm land.
- Dick: Yeah. Well the only thing is that our matting started to sink in a wet season in the spring and then the engineers came in, and we worked off of a taxi we had [unintelligible] near Rye, there, and they rolled up the whole matting at the end, and then they had six by six trucks full of bags of concrete and the guys up there would just cut ‘em open and dump that, just the cement—not concrete—
- Jim: So no concrete, just cement?
- Dick: Just cement. And then they had, like, road graders, and they worked that cement into the mud, and then put some straw on top of it, and then rolled the matting back out on top of there again because it was getting so bad that if we took off by twos, and if the wingman got just the least little bit back, you know, his windshield, he’d have trouble seeing all the rest of the mission because he had all this mud on him. And before—just before takeoff, we had a chemical decontamination truck, which was a big tanker with some power spray, and then you’d get up to number one takeoff position, and then they’d spray—
- Jim: Clear of the mud?
- Dick: Yeah, clear off the [laugh] the mud, and then—
- Jim: Decontaminate the mud.
- Dick: Yeah. And so we took this farmer, this fellow that owns this thing, Martin Chedwick, and he’s very friendly to us, and so he was telling us the first time it was kind of tough to plow. [laughs] Break it up. Now he cash crops that whole field now. But at any rate, when we were back there, he said one time, the first time we were back, he said, well, he didn’t know if anyone else cared, but he thought that he would like to donate a little plot of land, and he thought in future generations they should know something about who was there.
- Jim: Certainly.
- Dick: So he would give a plot of land and a granite base if we would have a bronze.

- Jim: Sure. To list all the [unintelligible]. That's what I was impressed with at Duxford. They listed every pilot that came out of Duxford who was killed, you know.
- Dick: Oh, okay.
- Jim: In that American museum part, the name of *each* and *every* one of them.
- Dick: I've never been in—that new museum now?
- Jim: Yes.
- Dick: I've never been there yet. I've seen it under construction.
- Jim: It's *absolutely* gorgeous.
- Dick: It wasn't done yet, but it was—
- Jim: Right. It was just started, yeah. Just finished, I mean.
- Dick: But anyhow, the first time when we went over there to dedicate that plaque and everything, we just kind of visited and a lot of these children that we gave food to, now they're adults, and they had served us a bang up lunch in the village hall and everything, and they welcomed us big time. And we've always—we still contribute money to a school over there. We bought them playground equipment and a little environmental center that they have and we—through our 339th Fighter Group Association that we have now, and so we've always kind of remembered that school over there. Now it's an elementary school.
- Jim: You send money over there every year?
- Dick: I don't know about every year. But, ah—
- Jim: Just periodically?
- Dick: Periodically. If they let us know of something they would like to have, and then we scrounge up the money for it. Quite a few of our fellows have done pretty well for themselves. And—
- Jim: Sure. So you said the annual, the usual gift would be something in the neighborhood of what?
- Dick: Oh, maybe five thousand—

- Jim: Five thousand?
- Dick: I think five thousand dollars, or one time I think it was eleven thousand dollars or something.
- Jim: Right. Something in that neighborhood.
- Dick: Yeah.
- Jim: That's terrific.
- Dick: One year I know we bought some kind of a little greenhouse that they set up in the back of the schoolyard there for some of their projects. And then we bought all the playground equipment; I think that was the last thing that we bought.
- Jim: What's the name of the town again?
- Dick: Fawlmere.
- Jim: F-a-l-m—f-a-l-l?
- Dick: F-a-w-l-m-e-r-e [Most likely "Fowlmere"].
- Jim: Oh, "Fawlmere." Okay.
- Dick: Yeah. It's a really old—like a part of this school was built in the 1600s, and there's been a new addition put on it since then. Now it's only an elementary school, I think maybe up to sixth grade, if that.
- Jim: Well, it's such a small town.
- Dick: Yeah. Yeah, and there's still—there was houses there with the straw roofs on, and stuff like that.
- Jim: Thatched roofs?
- Dick: Thatched roofs, yeah. It was a real quaint little place.
- Jim: Sure.
- Dick: And the pub, the Red Lion Pub, that thing is 1646, or something like that. You know, really old. It's still going.
- Jim: All right, sir that should do it.

Dick: Okay.

Jim: Thank you *very* much. I really appreciate this.

Dick: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]