

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
THOMAS A. THOMPSON
Pilot, Air Force, World War II.

2000

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Thompson, Thomas A., (1919-2002). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 45 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Thomas Thompson, an Ely, Minnesota native, discusses his World War II service in Europe as a pilot with the 2nd Bomb Division of the Army Air Corps and stateside as a member of Air Transport Command. Thompson touches on working for the Civilian Conservation Corps as a firefighter, attempting to enlist in the Air Corps in 1942, and being turned down because he was classified “4A” as the sole supporter for his family, as well as working in the essential iron mining industry. Drafted into the Air Corps in 1943, Thompson mentions flight training at Santa Ana (California) and Yuma (Arizona), learning copilot skills primarily from his pilot rather than instructors, and being sent to Tibenham (England) in a B-24 Bomber. He details the two missions when his plane crash-landed, including being hit by anti-aircraft fire, trying to fix the mechanical problems, and bailing out over the English Channel. Thompson portrays the fate of his crew and comments on giving a statement for the Nuremburg war trials. After thirty missions, he speaks of rotating back to the United States, ferrying cargo planes for the Air Transport Command, and delivering planes to the Russians. He touches upon joining the inactive Reserves and nearly being deployed during the Berlin Airlift. Thompson discusses using the GI Bill for the “52-20 club,” receiving a Silver Star, his brother’s stateside service, his career in forestry in the Midwest and the Bahamas, and being an inactive member of the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch:

Thompson (1919-2002) served as a co-pilot and pilot with the 2nd Bomb Division, 8th Air Force in Europe during World War II. After the war, he earned a degree in forestry at the University of Minnesota, served in the Air Force Reserve from 1945 to 1953, and eventually settled in Tomahawk (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed by Yasmine Flodin-Ali, 2010

Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: Okay, talking to Thomas Thompson. And the date is 11 October, year 2000. Where were you born, sir?
- Tom: Born in Hibbing, Minnesota.
- Jim: And you grew up there?
- Tom: No, I grew up in Ely.
- Jim: Okay, and when did you enter military service?
- Tom: Well, I signed up in September of 1942, but I wasn't called up until April 1st, 1943.
- Jim: Now I understand you had some experience in the CCC before that. Tell me about that experience, when was that?
- Tom: 1936, after my first year of college, I joined the CCs in order to make some money and I spent ten months there, one year of college, and then went back to college and finished my second year of college.
- Jim: What did they pay you in the Civilian Conservation Corps?
- Tom: They paid us five dollars a month and sent twenty-five home to the parents, but I was at home anyway. I spent only about a week in the camp, but I used to go there periodically for various things.
- Jim: But that included room and board?
- Tom: No, they paid me a stipend, about twenty bucks a month, which is about what they fed the CCs for, so I really got thirty dollars plus twenty dollars for food and other stuff.
- Jim: They didn't have a mess hall that you ate in?
- Tom: No, I ate at home. I was across the street from the ranger station and I chased fires for four different federal ranger districts.
- Jim: What about the—they gave you a uniform, though?
- Tom: Well yeah, I had plenty of clothes, yes.
- Jim: But they provided that?

- Tom: They provided the clothes, yes. I had clothes for years later. [laughs]
- Jim: Right. Did you ever keep contact with any of those other fellows?
- Tom: No, no. No more than in the service, either. I've never kept contact with any of them because you just move on.
- Jim: I understand, I understand. But the experience was worthwhile, or not?
- Tom: Well [laughs], it was experience.
- Jim: You sort of practiced being a soldier type of experience?
- Tom: Well yes, we had a little of that in the CCs, yes.
- Jim: Did you have physical training?
- Tom: I didn't get in on that. I had plenty of physical training with fightin' the fires in the summer of '36. All of Northern Minnesota burned up, you know.
- Jim: But the CCCs didn't have regular physical programs that—
- Tom: Oh yes! Yes, they did. Yes. As a matter of fact, even after I got out of the CCs, one of the CC doctors moved into town and started a practice and he bought himself an airplane and he used to fly fishermen out and he took care of his practice, too.
- Jim: That's kinda nice, that's kind of nice. So were you drafted or did you enlist in the service?
- Tom: Well, I signed up for the draft, and, ah, then in September of 1942 they put us into class 1A to reclassify us. With my mother and sisters that I was taking care of, of course I asked the doctor—this was Doctor Schneiker, my CC camp doctor who gave me the preliminary examination—and I says, "Well, you think I'm in good enough shape to get into the Air Force?" And he says, "Sure, there's nothing wrong with ya except you drink too much." [laughs] So the next day I went down and signed up for the Air Force. And I came back and two weeks later I got a notice that I was classified 4A, what we used to call "single men with children." I had my family, my wife's mother's family to take of and my mother and then also I was underground in the mine, iron mine, so that was declared to be essential.
- Jim: Oh, tell me about that. What was this underground iron mine business?

- Tom: Yeah, that's where I was workin' at the time.
- Jim: Oh I see, that was an essential business so you could stay out—
- Tom: Yes. I was down there for two years after I left the Forest Service.
- Jim: How far underground were you?
- Tom: Fourteen hundred feet.
- Jim: Did you get down there by an elevator?
- Tom: Yes, by a cage they called it, a shaft.
- Jim: You were digging with shovels?
- Tom: Oh no, no; that was all machinery.
- Jim: I see. Was that a tough job?
- Tom: Uh, yeah. Of course I was in the repair gang most of the time, but I used to go into the slices when people were sick or off, you know.
- Jim: That's a dangerous job, isn't it?
- Tom: Well, some parts of it were, yeah, but it was like anything else, it's got good points and bad points.
- Jim: Do they pay you well to do that?
- Tom: Well yeah, we got paid six dollars and eighty-seven cents a day.
- Jim: That's pretty good pay in those days.
- Tom: Oh yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Okay. Well, I'm straying. It's just interesting because I haven't talked to anybody who did that. Tell me about—now where did they first send you again? Santa Ana?
- Tom: They called me up in April of 1943. I went to Santa Ana Army Airbase for preflight and I had most of my training in the San Joaquin Valley of California, which is north of Bakersfield in there, up to Stockton, and the last four weeks we went down to Yuma, Arizona because Stockton was fogged in all the time. And then you were supposed to get the type of aircraft that you wanted to fly. And after we graduated, well, we hadda go

to Fresno, which we found out was a replacement depot. And our whole class was consigned to be copilots.

Jim: You had no choice?

Tom: We had no choice, no.

Jim: Didn't everybody start off wanting to be a fighter pilot?

Tom: Well yeah, yeah, but they—until then we didn't know. So we went straight to operational training unit. Pilots that just finished their transition to B-24s came in and picked their crews. And we went to Mirage Dry Lake and did our phase training, three different phases that we went through, and then went overseas.

Jim: But as a copilot, you just about had the same training as a pilot, didn't you?

Tom: Well, you follow through all the time. No, they had—actually they had two more months in transition to the type of airplane we flew in combat, so they had two months' start on us, and the way we learned was by following through and working with them.

Jim: In other words, your final instruction was through the pilot rather than anybody else?

Tom: Yeah, the pilot was the airplane commander.

Jim: But he gave you your final teaching. Well, that's an interesting way to teach, one teaches another.

Tom: Well it was, it was almost like the blind leading the blind, because they had about seventy hours in this airplane and most of the time we were with the instructor and the instructor sat in the copilot seat and flew with the pilot and the few times that—well, about half the time we went solo and did the practicing without an instructor. Well, I followed through on—all the copilots followed through on the controls. Because we got into combat and it took both of us on the controls sometimes to keep the thing from turning over on its back. [laughs] And, uh—

Jim: I understand. So by the time you finished that, you were capable of flying the airplane?

Tom: Well, I was—long before that already, we had an instance where the pilot couldn't fly and of course the airplane had to fly, so the, so the instructor pilot took me out with the crew and we shot landings and takeoffs and he

cleared me for the things that I needed to do on the airplane in an emergency before we ever went overseas.

Jim: So when you finished your copilot training, then you're a second lieutenant and—

Tom: Yes. Well, we were second lieutenants when we got out of flying school, but all we had was in the advanced trainer.

Jim: So when did you get your first B-24?

Tom: Well, I flew 'em all my missions as a copilot, but I did that by choice. They checked me out on my twelfth mission and asked me to take a crew and I couldn't see the responsibility of the ten guys that were in the airplane including myself. These fellows that took that transitional course plus the operational training unit had a lot to learn, but they were able to function. I didn't feel that I could do that. I says, "You send me back to transition school and I'll take a crew." Well, after I finished thirty missions they sent me back and then I, they did send me to an air transport command school where we hadda learn all this beams and stuff, relearn the stuff and get a white card over again, and it was a C-47 transition. And from there I went into the Air Transport Command and I flew B-24s and DC-3s or C-47s, C-46s and C-54s, UC-78s, wherever they wanted them in the States.

Jim: I see. Well, we're getting ahead there now. When you finished your training in California, where did you go?

Tom: We went to England.

Jim: You flew over?

Tom: Yeah.

Jim: Yeah, you didn't take a ship and find your plane there?

Tom: No, I flew back in the boat. [laughs]

Jim: I understand. But you flew over in the 24 then, as copilot?

Tom: Yes.

Jim: Where were you stationed?

Tom: We were stationed at Tibenham, about eighteen miles south of Norwich in England.

Jim: Is that far from Duxford?

Tom: Ah, not too far.

Jim: Yeah, I think I know where that is. I was at Duxford last year. Great museum.

Tom: Oh! Did you read, meet a guy by the name of Roger Freeman?

Jim: [Laughs]. I don't think so.

Tom: Oh. He was a historian for the 2nd Air Force. I'll show you a poem that he wrote.

Jim: For the 2nd Air Force, not the 8th?

Tom: 2nd Bomb Division of the 8th Air Force. See, there was the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions. The 1st Division was B-17s, the 2nd Division was B-24s and the 3rd Division started out to be B-24s and they switched over to B-17s.

Jim: I didn't know that.

Tom: Yeah, they did.

Jim: Okay. So how long were you there?

Tom: A little less than six months.

Jim: In England?

Tom: Yes.

Jim: And how many missions were you expected to carry out?

Tom: I flew thirty missions.

Jim: That was the standard then?

Tom: No, actually the standard was thirty-five.

Jim: It changed, you know. It started at twenty-five then moved to thirty, then moved to thirty-five.

- Tom: Yeah, right. But even when it was thirty-five, about in, oh, September or so of 1944, they said, “Well, it’s up to the flight surgeon to determine whether a guy was ready to come home or not.”
- Jim: Catch-22. That’s the old catch-22.
- Tom: Oh absolutely. If he was flak happy enough—
- Jim: Then he would not want to fly, but if he didn’t want to fly—well, it’s the same old story. Like that book, that hilarious book. [laughs]
- Tom: Yeah. Well, you know, there was a crew that finished thirty missions, twenty-five missions, and they came back to the States and they called them R&R you know, recuperation and return. Well, the copilot decided to stay there. He says, “I’m, I’m in good shape,” and he went into Operations and he wound up a captain—for all I know, maybe more than that—without takin’ that vacation at home. The rest of ‘em came back to the States and the bombardier and navigator found something else in the States they applied for and the only one that returned was the gunners and the enlisted crew and the pilot. And of course they made the pilot an assistant operations officer and he’s the one that gave me the check-out. And he had the engineer and radio operator along with him, and they heard when I told him, I said I’d just as soon stay as a copilot and finish this tour and all I want to do is get my rear end back to the States. [laughs] Those guys, they were very unhappy, because the pilot didn’t have to fly any more missions. The rest of ‘em got out of it and the copilot, of course, he used to fly informing[?] missions and stuff like that but never in combat, and he was working out of Operations. So these guys says, well, they’ll fly fourteen missions until I get to have thirty missions and then they’re hanging it up. I didn’t have anything to do with the deal! [laughs] So they flew fourteen missions with me as a copilot and—[laughs]
- Jim: Right. So tell me about your missions; how close did you get to being shot down?
- Tom: Well, we crash-landed once on our fifth mission, and that’s the reason why I was without a crew on my twelfth mission; I lost the whole works.
- Jim: You have to explain that.
- Tom: Well, it was a funny deal. We were over target and we got hit pretty bad and I had a flak vest on and I could feel somethin’ hit me in the chest but it didn’t hurt me. And the pilot, he jumped up like that you know. I happened to be flying so I just skidded out of formation, and “What the heck is going on?” He says, “I got nicked in the leg.” He says, “I’m gonna go down and talk to the radioman.” He was our first aid man, you know. I

says, "Go ahead." I had it, you know. I flew twenty-four missions number three on a lead in our squadron, so I had—and the copilot monitored sea channel, which was the fighter channel, so you didn't get in on a command set that talked back and forth inside the airplane unless if they wanted to call you, they put you on call and then you could hear them. But I was in contact with the fighter pilots in case—but if we got hit by fighters I'd put the call on and tell 'em watch out for such fighters coming in from so on and so forth, you know. And I directed the firing when, ah, it was a hit by fighters. But well anyhow, he started to get out of his seat and we had these crazy mummy seats, a brand new airplane with crazy mummy seats. They were armored plated, but they were too small for either one of us. [laughs] He started to get up and got his big thirteens[?] out in the aisle and he started to get up and he, and all of a sudden he turned around and he grabbed the mike and he says, "Fire in the bomb bay, everybody out." And he says, "Go." I says, "Your feet." I says, "I got it." So he went and I just locked my eyes on the artificial horizon and I don't know if I prayed or not. I says, "I just hope they all get out of here." And uh—

Jim: Where were you at the time?

Tom: About twenty thousand, twenty-two thousand feet over Aachen. No, Saarbrücken.

Jim: Had you dropped your load yet?

Tom: Oh yeah, it was after bombs away, just after bombs away. The bomb bay doors didn't quite close when we got hit so bad. But there was some of this that was so awful black that the black smoke that came through around the nose turret and every place you couldn't tell whether it was fire or not half the time. Anyhow, he gave the order and the next—I was waitin' for the bang, you know, and the next thing I know, well the radioman was right there behind me with a fire extinguisher and he had the nose gunner along with him and I says, "Where's the rest of them? Where's the fire?" He says, "I got it out; it was in the put-put."

Jim: What's that?

Tom: That was the auxiliary hydraulic—or, auxiliary electric system underneath the flight deck. And I don't know whether it was the black smoke or the fire or what it was, but he was lucky that there was gas coming in the bomb bay and, ah, it didn't blow up, which is very unusual for them. Anyhow, I told him to look it over and see what he thinks. In the meantime he says, "The gas is pretty bad in the bomb bays," and I looked and we had these darn gauges behind the pilots and I switched around on them and I said, "Well, the cross feed is on." I shut the cross feed off that

crossed between the tanks; we had four tanks, you know. And it, it kind of quit, it gripped. What I mean, it wasn't just raining gasoline, and he and this nose gunner looked it over and, ah, they were by, by the rear entrance on the other side of the bomb bays and, ah they were lookin' out and I don't know, I made a "why are you sittin' there; come over here," and he must have misread my signal and of course they were lookin' out and they saw two airplanes comin' out there at us and they thought they were Germans. Then they, they jumped out. So I was in the airplane alone.

Jim: I was going to say, you're the only one left! Jesus Christ, I can't believe it. Nor could you. [both laugh]

Tom: Well, neither could I! [laughs] Well anyhow, you know there was a problem with trimming and there was control problems. I couldn't get it trimmed out right. Of course the bomb bays and the crew went out about the same time, so there was a big differential in the trimming, you know. And of course these B-30, B-51s, they came in and they showed me their wings so I knew they were friends. And of course we were always wary of pressing the mike button when there was gasoline around, but I says well, I didn't even think about it. I pressed it and they got a heading for me to fly, which I was flying a westerly heading and they stayed with me and we wound up about twelve thousand feet over Brussels. And, ah, then I know they were shootin' at me and I evaded them and then we got to a, a field in England.

Jim: Oh, you got across the Channel?

Tom: Yeah [laughs]. Well I only had two engines when I got to the—you know, those—I had the cross feed off so that we got direct from the two, ah four tanks, and two of 'em ran out of gas and one of 'em was the tank that had the hydraulic pump on and the auxiliary hydraulic pump was in the bomb bays in the star valve so I couldn't go and turn that one off, and of course I was alone in the airplane. It was a brand new airplane, but I didn't care much about that. I saw the white cliffs of Dover and I was pretty happy about it all.

Jim: I'll take anything from now on.

Tom: And, well, I start trying to figure out how to land it; well, I couldn't get the gear down, gas in the bomb bays, and I was alone in the darn thing, so I told a fighter pilot, I says, "I'm gonna take it out where it ain't gonna hurt anybody." So I went out and just about as a last resort, you know, I got to thinkin' about it. I says geez, they got the darn Channel mined for invasion, you know, in case there—I don't think they ever pulled them out, so I had to go far enough out so I wouldn't get involved with them.

And I jumped out and I had one engine going when I jumped out, but I had plenty of altitude yet.

Jim: Where did you jump from the plane, from the open bomb bay or the back end?

Tom: No, I went out the nose reel [?] door in the front. The bomb bay doors wouldn't open and I didn't want to go all the way back; it was easier to go out the nose reel door.

Jim: Was that hard to do?

Tom: No. Uh-uh.

Jim: There was plenty of room?

Tom: No, it—well, there was an extinguisher, CO₂, you know, that—but not enough, that foam, but not enough to keep me—I grabbed onto the bulkheads and pulled. And I was in the Channel about—well my watch didn't even stop; I had a waterproof watch—less than an hour.

Jim: Did you have anything to hold on to?

Tom: Well, I put a dinghy on, you know these one man dinghys? And of course I had the Mae West. I inflated those things and I was in the Channel and left my clothes on, you know. It was in August; it was kind of cold but not too bad. And the next thing I know I saw a gunwale of a boat, just went by me like that, and I grabbed that and some guy grabbed me, pulled me in. It was a minesweeper crew and they took me and put me into Dover and the MPs with a Jeep took me to Manston and my crew picked me up in Manston. It was an emergency landing strip, you know. And of course when I got back, some guy says, "Well why in the heck didn't you bail out over land? It's stupid going into the Channel." About two weeks later someone had to let one go, they didn't have any choice, and the darn thing hit a school house and killed fifty-six kids.

Jim: That's the answer to that question.

Tom: Yeah, so—

Jim: Where was your crew now? Did you see any of them? Did they get back?

Tom: Well everything was okay. First of all, the radioman was a concert violinist and he had taken French in school and of course he knew radio pretty well. And he got in there, he was one of the last ones to bail out, so we were actually over France. And he got in with the Free French as a

radio operator and stayed with them until the Americans caught up with him there, then he came back. [laughs] I was sleeping one morning, I could hear the darn bombers were forming overhead and it was this constant roar, you know, but that didn't keep us from sleeping. The blackout curtains were pulled and everything. All of a sudden somebody got me under the chin, it was cold, and here was old Stemp. He had a German helmet on [James laughs] and a coat and a German rifle! [laughs]

Not only French, but he could talk German, you know. *Achtung, macht schnell!* Scared the hell out of me! And of course we had to compare notes, you know, and he was so damn mad that he didn't stay with me, but he says I don't know what kind of signal you—and those damn mummy cases, you know. I just—he thought I was saying get the hell out. But he made it back.

Jim: He was surprised you kept on going, I suppose?

Tom: Well yeah, he was surprised I got back to England, sure.

Jim: And the other guy who jumped out?

Tom: Well, I never did know; he was a prisoner.

Jim: That's right, he was captured. And the pilot too?

Tom: He was a replacement, because on that first crash landing our nose gunner got jarred, his eyeballs were all bloodshot for about two weeks, you know. And he couldn't fly, so he wasn't with us then.

Jim: That was an earlier mission?

Tom: Yeah, that was on our sixth mission, see. But what we did was you flew eight days whether it was a mission or not and then you were off for two days. You went to London or Norwich, or any place you wanted to. But well, I think I would have been okay except that I was in school when the Nuremburg trials started and I had to fill out all this stuff here. The pilot and the two waist gunners were pitch-forked by natives down on the ground.

Jim: Oh. Oh my.

Tom: Yeah.

Jim: Well, you were lucky to find that out.

Tom: Well, I didn't care to find that out, you know.

- Jim: No, I know that. But I say it's amazing—
- Tom: But I had to make a statement for the Nuremburg trials.
- Jim: Oh really. How did you find out— I suppose eventually they picked up all the records and—
- Tom: Yeah, I suppose.
- Jim: Oh my. Well, that was two exciting experiences. That and the crash landings were the worst of the worst? [**End of Tape 1, Side A**]
- Tom: Well yeah, that was about the worst of it.
- Jim: And then you said you finished thirty missions and then changed to something else?
- Tom: Then I came to the States and had thirty days off and then I went into the ATC [Air Transport Command].
- Jim: Did you ask to do that or they said—
- Tom: Well, it was either B-24 or B-29 transition and I had a choice, but they didn't really give us a choice because actually what they did was they assigned us to a training command. But when we got to the place, I was sent back to the same school that I graduated from.
- Jim: When did you get back from England?
- Tom: I got back December 4th of 1944.
- Jim: 1944. Then you switched over into a different aircraft?
- Tom: Yes I started in—I was supposed to go to instruct and the ATC took over the field and we ferried all the airplanes out of there.
- Jim: Sure. By that time were you a captain?
- Tom: No, I never made it over first lieutenant.
- Jim: Okay. And you were acquainted with these aircraft that you were going to instruct in, though, weren't you?
- Tom: Well [laughs]—

- Jim: Or sort of?
- Tom: The 24 of course I was, and the UC-78, which was the advanced trainer, but the other three I flew they gave us two hours of instruction and three landings—
- Jim: Yeah, but with all of your experience those are easier planes to fly.
- Tom: Well yeah, and the DC-3 or DC-47, which was a Douglas Dakota, that's the old—we used those with the company I worked with in the Bahamas; Owens Illinois, we had a couple of them. And then the Dumbo, the C-46 twin engine, I got two hours instruction on that.
- Jim: Was that a more difficult plane to fly?
- Tom: No, it was just bigger, that's all. And the C-54 was a pilot's airplane. That was four engine, that was what they call a DC-4. That was the airplane that took care of the Berlin airlift.
- Jim: Massive. That's the one that flew me to Korea.
- Tom: Oh yeah. Oh, you went to Korea?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Tom: Oh. Did you go with a medical attachment?
- Jim: No, I was being sent to a hospital ship, but I went on my own. I had orders almost immediately after the war started because in World War II I spent part of my time in medical school, so they were just waiting for another war so they could get their time back.
- Tom: [Laughs]. It was the same war, you know!
- Jim: I know it. So within a month I had orders directly to the ship and it was in Incheon, so one Sunday I left, mild, peaceful, everything was wonderful around here, one week later I'm in the middle of this goddamn war; I just couldn't believe it. [laughs]
- Tom: I know just what you mean. I graduated from the University of Minnesota in June of 1948; the Berlin Airlift started in 1948 in June. And I was—in my Reserve I was discharged at Romulus Airfield, which is now Detroit International, and that's where I picked up the B-24s. And I went out from there to Buffalo and wherever we picked up airplanes like C-54s at Park Ridge, which is now O'Hare field, there was two tin buildings in the corner that they built these things. [both laugh] But that's a long time ago.

And Romulus was a bunch of barracks, you know. It was a military field. But—

Jim: So anyway, so we got you into the ____ [?] business—

Tom: Anyhow, when I got out they had suggested that you join the Reserve for five years, the inactive Reserve. I says, “Well fine, what could happen?” [James laughs] I was assigned to Selfridge Field and they sent me stuff every week, you know, on stuff like that. But by the time I graduated, you know, I had one child, eight months old, and Selfridge was a troop carrier outfit, you know, Reserve, and the only thing that saved me, I think, was the tail end “Ts”; they started alphabetically. A lot of ‘em went to Berlin that time and that was not very good going.

Jim: Oh, really? I know it was a busy time, but otherwise you had to fly in bad weather, I guess that was the problem?

Tom: The corridor was so narrow and the Russians—

Jim: Just looking for an opportunity to knock you down?

Tom: Well, they were just harassing ‘em.

Jim: If you got close to the outside of your zone they would buzz ya and—

Tom: Yeah, they didn’t care what they did, you know.

Jim: I didn’t know that.

Tom: Yeah, that was tough. And then the weather was so bad, you know.

Jim: How long—did you go over then?

Tom: No, no I didn’t have to. Because, like I say, tail end “Ts”; they didn’t get to them.

Jim: If your name had been Adam you’d have been there right away.

Tom: That’s right, I probably would have gone. Well anyhow, then after Korea—

Jim: Well how did we get to Korea here?

Tom: Oh I didn’t go. But see, I was up in a lumber camp up in Minnesota, you know, for the same outfit that I—

- Jim: You didn't tell me what you flew for the flying service at the end of the war.
- Tom: Well yeah I did, the C-47s—
- Jim: From where to where?
- Tom: Well, wherever.
- Jim: But in the States?
- Tom: Yeah. Mostly, yeah. Like C-47s I picked that up at Oklahoma field at Tinker. Most of the ones I picked up had a red star on the side and instead of those bucket seats they had in the Americans, these had airline seats in. We were building airlines for the Russians. I'd fly 'em from Oklahoma City to East Base in Great Falls, Montana and a couple Russian women would pick 'em up from there and take 'em [laughs] up to Alaska and over to Siberia [laughs].
- Jim: Oh really? And this was at the end of the war or after?
- Tom: Well, it was before the end of the war. When the war ended, I mean, I was on my way out because of points.
- Jim: Sure. Boy, what an experience.
- Tom: Well it was fun, it was fast. And the reason why I went there is because like I walked like twenty-eight miles to sign my name in two places for the selective service, I wasn't about to go into an infantry outfit. And I was always interested in airplanes. That's why I was in aeronautical engineering.
- Jim: That's what I was going to get to next. That was the end of your military career then, really?
- Tom: Right. Well you know, 1953, then sent me, every week they sent me some stuff from Selfridge and in 1953—
- Jim: You mean asking you to rejoin? To re-up?
- Tom: No, Korea was still going on and they called us down to Duluth to give us a secondary what they call military specialty number, and they went according to what I had the training in, surveying and forestry and stuff like that. I got the secondary MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] of cartographer, and then there was one little slip of paper here that says "I

desire/I do not desire to remain in the Reserves” and you should have seen me grab a pen, because by that time I had four kids.

Jim: And enough military time to last you a lifetime.

Tom: And I never got another piece of paper from Selfridge; that was it.

Jim: Yeah. I stayed in the Navy Reserve, inactive, for a while, for about seventeen years, until finally I decided what’s the point?

Tom: I was eight years. But see, they froze us when Korea came along and—

Jim: Oh, I know that. I know a lot of guys who came aboard my hospital ship and they said, “I didn’t know I had to do this,” and I said, “Well, welcome aboard, pal.” [laughs] So if the Army or Navy wants you, they’re gonna get you no matter what your defense is.

Tom: Sure. And they will put you where they want you, too. You didn’t talk to Buck Nelson here in town, did you?

Jim: No.

Tom: His kids run the County Market, but he was instrumental—he has been a grocer here for years, since World War II, but he was a mess sergeant, I think a mess sergeant in the Air Force.

Jim: Oh really?

Tom: Yeah. Buck Nelson, he’s a big man in town here. Of course the kids are running the store now. But there’s a lot of CCs that learn to cook in the CCs that became cooks in the Army, too.

Jim: Tell me how you won your Silver Star. Flying the airplane home?

Tom: I don’t know why they gave that to me. The only darn thing is because I took the darn thing out where it wouldn’t hurt nobody.

Jim: Well that’s worth a Silver Star, at least. You deserve that.

Tom: Yeah, that was, but that was—when the CO handed it to me he says, “Well this and a nickel will get you a cup of coffee any time.”

Jim: [Laughs] Well that’s a great statement.

Tom: [Laughs] But now it would take a buck at least for a cup of coffee.

- Jim: After the service you used your GI bill and went back to college?
- Tom: Oh yeah. Well, I went underground again, you know—
- Jim: Back to the mines?
- Tom: Yeah. After I came back all these people signed up for what they call 52-20 club. Well I signed up for it but I never collected anything. I went back home and I found out that my job was open in the mine and I had two years in and I got three years of military service, they gave me five years, so I had a week's vacation coming before I ever went anyplace. [laughs] I took the vacation and worked. Ely was a good place to get drunk, you know. There was thirty-eight bars and taverns in a town of five thousand. And my brother came home from the service and my mother made him take me to school because he was going down to work on his Masters. And I went down, he woke me up and I had been in a tavern, but I worked for it was about a month and he got out at Christmas. He had to write his own discharge because he got to be thirty-six, he shouldn't have been in the service to start with.
- Jim: No, I was going to say, too old.
- Tom: No we—when my Dad got sick we decided that we were going to get him through; he had two years in electrical and he went and became a teacher. Oh, and he had an awful low draft number and he says, "Well, they won't take me," because he lost his eye with a dynamite cap when he was five years old. And they looked at his resume and he was a mathematics teacher and he was a cross country skier and a downhill skier, so to speak, and a radio amateur, so he wound up a radio instructor in the ski troops at Dent Mountain.
- Jim: At age what?
- Tom: Well he's ten years older than me, so he must have been about thirty-two, something like that, thirty-one. And he went to POE [Point of Embarkation] to go overseas and the doctor says, "What's wrong with your eye?" and he says, "Nothing," took it out and showed it to him. [James laughs] And then they didn't know what to do with him.
- Jim: [Laughs]. Is this your only brother?
- Tom: Yeah. So they didn't know what to do with him. They sent him to George Washington University, Saint Louis, to x-ray repair school and installation school. He went from there to Fort Louis, Washington and installed six machines in there and he says, "Now what do I do?" and they says, "Well, you stay here and take care of those machines." He says, "These are new

machines; there is nothing wrong with them.” So he got a job in a screen door factory and in the meantime he’d married and he called his wife over and he stayed there until the people started gettin’ out of service. And then of course they looked at him and said, “Well, you’ve worked with a handicap all your life. How about interviewing these guys that have handicaps?” They sent him to Adjutant General School and then he couldn’t get out until he got to be thirty-six, he wrote his own discharge.

Jim: He’s doing all of this civilian work while he’s in the military?

Tom: [Laughs]. Yes.

Jim: What was his rank?

Tom: Huh?

Jim: What was his rank in the military?

Tom: Staff sergeant. He worked up from private to staff sergeant and he would have gone overseas as staff sergeant. They found out he was on limited service; that’s the way it goes.

Jim: Interesting. So now that you’ve finished your college degree at Minnesota, you were an engineer?

Tom: No, a forester.

Jim: You’re a forester, okay, and what was your first duty as a forester?

Tom: Well, you wouldn’t know about Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation?

Jim: You’re right, I don’t.

Tom: It’s a Minnesota department that worked on ore[?] tax money. There are sixteen Northern Minnesota counties that benefited from that, looking for new industry and putting forestry programs and land commissioners into these counties, they paid the way for stuff like that. And Chung King Chow-Mein, Gino’s Pizza, they financed that, all kinds of things they financed. They’re still going.

Jim: Oh really?

Tom: I worked for them for two years.

Jim: What was your job specifically?

- Tom: Cruising, cruising timber; tax delinquent land mostly.
- Jim: In an airplane?
- Tom: Oh no. [abrupt break in interview] We financed an outfit to start a flying service to do the photo work.
- Jim: Well as you survey just in a car, you just drive highways and look?
- Tom: Well, no, no. We went out there on the ground. We hadda sample everything, built a database, so to speak. And predicted growth and everything else, you know. But I worked there two years and then they had a great big blow down up in Minnesota which they've had again in the same area that we cut over at that time, but we cut about a quarter million cords of wood out of that blow down up there; this was a private company, Tomahawk Timber. That's how I got with Tomahawk Timber and wound up down South and up here.
- Jim: You were at Owens Corning, you said.
- Tom: Owens Illinois, yeah.
- Jim: What did you down there?
- Tom: Well, they bought out Tomahawk—or National Container bought out Tomahawk Craft Paper Company here, and then Owens Illinois bought them out. This was a rising merger where they were coming up with the conglomerates like they're doing again now.
- Jim: So now you're finishing, you finished your career in that?
- Tom: I did right here, yeah. I made a complete circle out to the Islands and that's where I met Jim Weiss' dad up at a taconite plant in Babbitt, Minnesota, and then he wound up in the Bahamas and so did I.
- Jim: What were you doing down there? Come on, that's another story.
- Tom: Logging!
- Jim: What?
- Tom: Logging. Pulpwood logging.
- Jim: In the Bahamas?
- Tom: Oh yeah.

- Jim: You know, you never associate those two words, logging and the Bahamas. I think of bikinis in the Bahamas but not logging.
- Tom: From 1956 until 1975. And I mean, we cut over ninety acres a day.
- Jim: What kind of wood?
- Tom: Pine.
- Jim: Pine? Pine forests that we're missing from Wisconsin that everybody took out in the earlier part of the century?
- Tom: Yeah, well we shifted to Jacksonville, Florida; that was a paper mill there.
- Jim: These pines are what, twenty years old?
- Tom: Oh they were more than that. Fifty, sixty.
- Jim: They were pretty good-sized trees then?
- Tom: Well no, it wasn't supposed to grow there. It was on coral rock, which is basic, so to speak, but the pine didn't know any different. They'd grow like mad for twelve years and then they'd slow down. And it was six thousand pounds to a cord which that salty water it wouldn't float, it would seek its depth someplace between the bottom and the top. [laughs] Yeah, you couldn't float the stuff, but we had ah—
- Jim: And you supervised the cutting? They'd take it by barge or—
- Tom: Yeah, we had a barge, two barges that held about eighty carloads a piece. And we had tugs that towed 'em.
- Jim: Didn't the people of the Bahamas start to object to taking down their forests?
- Tom: Oh no, no, no. We paid the Crown a stumpage rate and hired the people down there.
- Jim: So they were perhaps happy about that?
- Tom: Yeah. No, they didn't object to that; it grows back.
- Jim: I suppose everything grows faster down there anyway.
- Tom: Well, it grows pretty fast for the first twelve years.

- Jim: Is that typical of a pine tree? I don't know anything about it.
- Tom: No, well yeah, it grows faster down South than it does up here.
- Jim: Are we talking about white pine?
- Tom: No, this was like the red pine here. Or the slash pine they have in the South. It was a long-leaf pine, pretty much like the red pine here but much heavier.
- Jim: Around here they grow them for pulp, right?
- Tom: Well, they grow them for logs here too.
- Jim: What do you mean? For making boards?
- Tom: Oh yeah. But we just cut it for pulp out there and we couldn't chip it or anything because that would be a semi-manufactured product and they'd have to charge us excise tax or something.
- Jim: Did you join any veterans groups?
- Tom: Twice actually. I joined the American Legion when I first came back in Ely up there. Then when I went to school I forgot about it and I joined here, oh, it must be about twenty years ago. But I'm not active at all.
- Jim: American Legion?
- Tom: American Legion, yeah.
- Jim: It's not much of an organization any more. It used to be.
- Tom: No, no, because there's so many of them. This what Roosevelt had in mind, you break it up.
- Jim: Well I think the things like the VFW and all that—
- Tom: Well the AMVETS, they say that the American Legion doesn't cover up enough people because they only have you if you were in the service in a bracket when there was a war. AMVETS, any service at all, and of course the Veterans of Foreign Wars you've got to be in somebody else's country. Of course then there's all the disabled Americans vets and the DAV. Well, which, what do you belong to?
- Jim: None.

- Tom: None. Well I'm still in American Legion but I don't go to meetings or anything.
- Jim: I ought to belong to the DAV; they send me a request for money every week, it seems.
- Tom: Yeah.
- Jim: You get those things in the mail constantly.
- Tom: Yeah. Well they all send me stickers and, like the rest of the—like the March of Dimes, the first March of Dimes was a very good thing, but they don't even ask you for dime, now they say well twenty bucks or over.
- Jim: I made a rule long ago, I don't give to any diseases. If it's a disease I say join United Way.
- Tom: Well I give to the American Cancer Society because my first wife and two daughters have all died of cancer, and the third daughter is trying like hell to find a genetic cause with McArdle. She's been down there a number of years now.
- Jim: Is she married?
- Tom: Oh, yeah. Yeah, she's married to a guy that works for Fish and Wildlife.
- Jim: Got some grandchildren for ya?
- Tom: Yeah, one; she's ready to go to college.
- Jim: Oh that's nice. Two of my grandchildren have been to college. And two or more are going to be out of high school in a couple years and the youngest grandchild is now attending the same high school that I went to and my kids went to, so that's kind of a thrill.
- Tom: Oh yeah, where was that?
- Jim: West High in Madison.
- Tom: West High in Madison? Yeah, well my daughter's, my granddaughter goes to Middleton.
- Jim: Oh really? I live right next to Middleton.

- Tom: Yes, she's on the swimming team and all that kind, gymnastics. She's a senior now.
- Jim: Yes, they have good programs there. That's a good school she's in.
- Tom: Yeah, they live across uh—oh they call it “Wildlife Trail,” it's off of Airport Road, west of Twelve.
- Jim: I know where it is, yeah.
- Tom: Just on the other side of Madison.
- Jim: I live right next door to an Alzheimer's home. So I tell everybody when my wife starts asking me to take walks with her I know that sooner or later she's going to leave me off at the front door. [both laugh]
- Tom: A friend of mine, well a fellow I went to school with at Minnesota that worked for Iron Range Resources with me, spent a career you might say at Forest Products Laboratory. He's a Jewish fellow, and I stopped into his place, he had just tried to make a house for himself on Tonyawatha[?] Trail. You could look right across at the capital; he was the first one on the road there.
- Jim: In Monona?
- Tom: Right, in Monona. [laughs].
- Jim: I know where he is.
- Tom: His wife was, I don't know, some kind of an artist. She designed the furniture and he designed the house and they built it with their own two hands. He's still around someplace.
- Jim: Very good. Did you forget to tell me any stories before we quit here?
- Tom: No, I ain't got anything more. I think I talked too much now.
- Jim: No, you did very well.
- Tom: Well.
- Jim: Did you get along all right with the Englishmen?
- Tom: What?
- Jim: With the English? Did you get along all right with the English people?

Tom: In the islands?

Jim: Yes.

Tom: Oh yes, yes, that was no problem. Most of our real working crew were interlopers there, they just grew out of the trees: Haitians, French-speaking, black. You couldn't—well, the natives of the islands there, they did work in some categories but mostly on an hourly basis, and they had some key positions but they didn't cut any of the wood. Most of it was either the Haitians or from Turks Island—have you ever been there?

Jim: No.

Tom: Grand Turk?

Jim: I know it, but I've never been there.

Tom: It's off of Haiti but it's English speaking. Pretty poor people.

Jim: But you lived in the Bahamas then?

Tom: No. Jim Weiss did, his family did, but the kids were too big and we have one that's special education, he's a mongoloid, and West Palm Beach had an excellent school there because of the Kennedys so we lived in West Palm Beach for five years. Same way with when we were in Knoxville. Old George Dempster, you know, he wouldn't hire anyone in his dumpster factory unless they had something wrong with them.

Jim: Is that right? I didn't know that.

Tom: Oh yeah, he was a stickler on that. Well, I guess they had somebody in the family that was disabled. You better shut that thing off.

Jim: Why, are you going to say something bad?

Tom: No.

[End of Interview]