

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ERNEST H. TRESCH  
U. S. Army Air Corps, World War II

2007

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**Tresch, Ernest H.**, (1917-2009), Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Ernest Tresch, a Fleming, Ohio native, describes his World War II experience with the Army Air Corps as a combat pilot in North Africa and Southern Europe and as a pilot for General Eisenhower. After basic and advanced training in Texas, Tresch discusses reporting for active duty at MacDill Field (Florida) and training with B-26 planes. Sent to Africa in 1942, he touches on his flight across the Atlantic and flying sub patrols out of Oran (Algeria). He describes flying combat missions with the 320<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in North Africa in support of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army. Tresch mentions bombing runs in Sicily, Italy, and Sardinia. He describes close-calls among the crew, such as flak being stopped by a parachute buckle, and states he was fortunate that no one from his crew was ever wounded. After forty missions, he talks about going into Air Transport Command at the New Castle Army Air Base (Delaware), training with heavier equipment, and flying supplies overseas and wounded back. Tresch describes joining General Eisenhower's crew in 1945 and flying around Europe for six weeks before Eisenhower was appointed Chief of Staff. He discusses his father's death at this time and being given transportation home and as much time as he needed. Tresch speaks about working for Eisenhower and says, "He was a wonderful fellow." Tresch talks about flying Eisenhower on a Pacific tour and on a good-will tour in Rio de Janeiro. After discharge in 1948, he reflects on his career as a corporate pilot and how he always wanted to fly.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Ernest Tresch (1917-2009) grew up on a farm in Fleming, Ohio. After graduation from Ohio State University in 1941, he entered the Army Air Corps as a pilot and flew on missions in North Africa and Europe. He piloted General Eisenhower for a year before being transferred to Special Air Missions. Discharged in 1948, he married his wife Anne and worked for the Marietta Concrete Corporation. He lived in Oregon, Wisconsin and passed away in 2009.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

**Interview Transcript:**

John: Okay, this is John Driscoll, and today is February 28, 2007, and this is an oral history interview with Ernie Tresch. Ernie was in the United States Army Air Corps in World War II, and Ernie is from Oregon, Wisconsin. Ernie, thanks a lot for coming up from Oregon and agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the very beginning, Ernie? When and where were you born?

Ernest: I was born on a farm in Fleming, Ohio.

John: Fleming?

Ernest: Down in southeastern Ohio. Twelve miles out of Marietta.

John: I was born in Youngstown. And, when was that?

Ernest: May 31, 1917.

John: Okay. And what about your family? Brothers? Sisters? Mom and dad?

Ernest: I had one brother and one sister, both older. Both gone. Mother and father are both gone. As a matter of fact, I am about the end of the line. I don't have any aunts or uncles. Down the line. I have two daughters, myself. One lives in Huntsville, Alabama, and she doesn't have any children. I have the other daughter, the younger one, is out here at Marshall. She teaches school there in the middle school. And she has two boys and a daughter. And that is the extent of the family.

John: Okay. How about growing up? How about school?

Ernest: I went to school in a small, well one-room school for the first six years. And the seventh and eighth was a three-room school. And the high school had just under a hundred. After high school, I went Ohio State University. From the University, I was sworn in as an aviation cadet.

John: What year was that, Ernie?

Ernest: That was in '41. And went, well, November 7, '41. Just thirty days before Pearl Harbor. Then we went down to Texas and went all the way through training in primary, secondary, advanced training there in Texas. And I reported for active duty at MacDill Field, Tampa. Florida. That was in July of '42.

John: Not to get too far ahead, but do you remember Pearl Harbor Day? Can you talk

about that? What you were doing?

Ernest: Actually, I was down in Texas, just going through training. And that Sunday, the lieutenant took about three of us fellows down to the field to look at some of the airplanes. And as we were going back up to the barracks, going through the main gate, the guard told us that they bombed Pearl Harbor. And I will never forget that. The lieutenant looked at us and said, "Well, fellows, in them civies now, you won't be wearing them for a while." And then I went through training there at Tampa, and we picked up our new airplanes there.

John: What kind of airplanes?

Ernest: B-26's. Martin.

John: Didn't they train at MacDill on the 26?

Ernest: We were just forming a new group. And I came into the outfit. It was being built up. And then we had some flying there. Well, the saying going there was "One a day in Tampa Bay."

John: I was just going to say that. We lived in Tampa. "A plane a day in Tampa Bay."

Ernest: Right.

John: You were a pilot?

Ernest: Right.

John: How was the 26 to fly?

Ernest: Actually, to start with, I didn't like the airplane at all. After I got time built up on it, and after we got into combat over in Africa, I fell in love with the airplane. And it was a tricky airplane. I mean, you had to stay on top of it. But if you didn't, it would kill you in nothing flat. But, after I got some time in it, why, I really fell in love with it.

John: When you finished up your training, where did you go? When you finished your training at MacDill?

Ernest: Transition.

John: Okay.

- Ernest: Then we came up to Fair Field, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. And picked up new airplanes there. And then we went back down to Miami, and on out, flew across the south Atlantic. Over to Africa. And I got to Africa in December of '42.
- John: Where in Africa?
- Ernest: To start with, down on the Gold Coast. And then we went up around the west coast of Africa, up to Oran. And that is where we started to fly sub patrols, out of Oran. That wasn't bad. And after you got more time built up, we moved over to Bessenia (?) and from there up to Montesque. And out of Montesque, we first started our actual combat missions.
- John: Before you get into combat missions, how did you navigate across the Atlantic? What did you have going for you there?
- Ernest: The only thing we had was radio, but actually, when we went across, I had less than a hundred hours in a B-26. And leaving Brazil, our first stop was Ascension Island. Which is a little island about seven miles long. Pretty small. And, at that time, with the experience and the equipment we had, that amount of island looked pretty small on a map. But from there, on into Africa.
- John: Okay. Then you said you started flying combat missions? Over what?
- Ernest: North Africa. Initially, we were flying support for the 5th Army. It was chasing General Rommel up the east coast of Africa. And we were flying missions on that. Knocking out airports and gun positions, railroads, so on like that. Occasionally, heavy troop concentrations. But normally, gun positions, railroads, airports.
- John: Was there any German air opposition?
- Ernest: Oh, yeah. We had German fighters, the 109's. And then as we were coming up, and we were getting close to surrender of the German forces up at Tunis, we started in on San Luria (?) Island, bombing it. Sicily, Italy, Sardinia.
- John: What kind of a bomb load can a B-26 carry?
- Ernest: Carrying 4,000 pounds. Now, like it depends on the target. We were carrying demolition bombs, anti-personnel bombs, frag bombs, and so on.
- John: How long did that go on?
- Ernest: I flew my last mission on November 2nd, of '43.

John: How many missions in total did you fly there?

Ernest: We had, there in North Africa, we were flying forty combat missions before they would take you back to the States.

John: And you flew forty?

Ernest: Yes. And I was extremely fortunate. In the forty missions, never had a man in my crew scratched.

John: Wow, that is fortunate. That's very fortunate.

Ernest: We used to get shot up regularly. But, I mean with flak and fighters, well, like we bombed Palermo, Sicily. Came off of that mission, got back to Africa. Got a bite to eat. Went down to check the airplane over, there were eighty-six holes in it.

John: Oh, my God.

Ernest: But I had one mission, the bombardier had a summer cap on. Chunk of flak come up through the bottom, hit the bill of his cap, peeled it off his head. Waist gunner had flak come in, hit the buckle of his parachute. Tail gunner, back there on a little wooden stool like this, he was sitting on that with a seat pack chute on. Chunk of flak came up through the bottom, hit that stool and splintered it. But then the parachute absorbed the flak. It was just like that, day in and day out. On a regular basis. I felt extremely fortunate, never having a man scratched.

John: That is miraculous. Were you flying daily?

Ernest: Day flights. We weren't flying many night flights.

John: So the Germans shooting at you could see you.

Ernest: Yeah.

John: Okay, from there, did you come back to the States? Then what?

Ernest: Yes. I was with the Air Transport command.

John: Before that, what was the outfit you were with in North Africa?

Ernest: Oh, the 320th Bomb Group.

John: Okay.

Ernest: And I was in the 443rd Squadron.

John: Then you came back and went to the Air Transport Command?

Ernest: Right. New Castle Army Air Base in Wilmington, Delaware. And we reported in there and the operations officer asked what type of flying I had been doing. What I wanted to do, and so on. And, at that time, I thought I wanted to get into heavier equipment. And he said, well, help him. They had some B-26's up at Rome, New York, that they were turning over to the British. And he said, you help me get some of them down to Bermuda, to the British, then I will send you down to Birmingham, Alabama, for a check-out on B-24's. And then I could get some four-engine time on that, then he said, he'd put me into what they called Crescent Airlines, which was flying C-54's from the States, out of Wilmington. We would go up to LaGuardia and pick up a load. Then, depending on weather, we would either go to Steven Field, Newfoundland, or down to Bermuda. And from there, on over to Ascension Island, and from there on into Paris. We were flying supplies over and wounded back.

John: At the time, what was your rank?

Ernest: At the time, I was a first lieutenant.

John: Okay. How long were you doing that?

Ernest: Up to, let's see. '45, I was back, you know, from one of those runs and there was three of us that were living in an apartment downtown. Got a call there from a colonel at the base, he said that one of General Eisenhower's pilots was getting out of the service, and he was interviewing half a dozen of us, and asked if I would come out for an interview. And I told him, sure, I would. So, after the interview, went out past the operations office, and I said, I didn't expect to hear anything more from that, but if I do, I'll be at the apartment downtown. And about ten o'clock the next morning the phone rang and asked if Lieutenant Tresch was there. I said, "Speaking." And he said, "This is General George. You have a relative living in Germany." I said, "Not that I know of, sir." He said, "Thank you, that's all I wanted to know." He hung up. That afternoon I had orders to join General Eisenhower's crew in Frankfurt, Germany.

John: This was after the war ended, right?

Ernest: General Ike, at that time, had his headquarters in the I. G. Farben building. There in Frankfurt, Germany. And I joined the crew about six weeks before he came back to the States and became Chief of Staff. And so, I flew some there on the

continent, and then brought him back to the States.

John: What kind of an airplane?

Ernest: C-54.

John: Special, or what?

Ernest: It was plush C-54 type. Like I say, that was about six weeks before he was appointed Chief of Staff, and then after he was appointed, we had to make some trips back to Frankfurt to pick up office records, and personnel, and so on. And we made three total runs on that. And on the second one, my father was taken by a heart attack. And the family knew I was out of the country, no idea where I was. The only way they could get ahold of me was through his office through the Pentagon. Which they did. They radioed in to Frankfurt. We had left there. They finally caught up with me when we landed in Bermuda. And Colonel Henry, the base commander down there, came out to meet to airplane and told me what had happened. They refueled, and we came into Washington. And when we landed in Washington, Colonel Stack, the general's aide, was down to meet the airplane with a personal letter of sympathy from the general. They had reservations made by train and commercial air lines for me to go home, whichever I could use to better advantage. Take as much time as needed at home. Not three day, ten day, just take as much time as needed at home. Not to worry about the next shuttle trip. They could get a replacement for that trip, but my status on the crew would not be changed by this. And I felt pretty good. At that time, five star generals didn't have to do that for a first lieutenant. And well, naturally, he didn't do all that. He had the word to get it under way.

John: Did you ever get to meet him?

Ernest: Oh, yeah.

John: What was he like?

Ernest: Oh, he was a wonderful fellow. I've said several times that, as far as I am concerned, he was the most man that I ever met in one individual. But he was a wonderful fellow to work for. An example, we were coming back out of the Azores into Washington, no, we were supposed to land at Logan Field, in Boston. And coming out of the islands, we were getting miserable weather reports from the Boston area. And about an hour out, I went back and told him about the reports we were getting in. And I said, "In case we can't get in, we'll make a pass at it. We'll try. But in case we can't get in, what do you want to use for an alternate?" And he looked up and said, "When we are on this airplane, don't ask



me any questions. When we are on the ground, it might be different.”

John: Okay. That is great.

Ernest: That was the type of man he was to work for. And then, well, after we got squared away a little bit, and we made that tour of inspection of all the bases in the Pacific, and we took him on that.

John: Let me flip this over.

**[End of Side A of Tape 1.]**

John: Good. Okay, you are on the Pacific tour, then.

Ernest: Okay, we left Washington and went to Frisco, and refueled, and cleared customs, and so forth. Went into Hawaii, and then overnight in Hawaii. And then we started on across the Pacific, hitting the islands. Oh, Midway, Kwajalein, Okinawa, and so on. On into Manila, and then he had meetings with General MacArthur there. Then on up to Seoul, Korea, and back down to Shanghai, China.

John: You got some flying in.

Ernest: And we hit the islands again on the way home. And made a very interesting trip.

John: Was it that much different, flying the Pacific than it was flying the Atlantic?

Ernest: Actually, we had more rough weather in the North Atlantic than we did in the Pacific. The type of sea in the North Atlantic. But the ocean is out there.

John: That is interesting. What year was this? What year was this? When you were making the tour? Was that after the war?

Ernest: Yes, let's see. That would have been late '45.

John: Okay.

Ernest: And after that trip, we made some domestic trips. Then he made that good-will tour to Rio de Janeiro. And to my knowledge, there has never been a time with that much rank on board one airplane, as there was on that. We had General Eisenhower, who was a five star general. General Vandenberg, at that time, was three stars. Generals Snyder, Sherwin, and Persons with two stars apiece.

John: That is a lot of stars.

- Ernest: And, actually, when we got back, there was a lot of hell raised about that much rank on one airplane. If anything happened.
- John: How big a crew did you have on there?
- Ernest: We had a pilot, co-pilot, radio operator, navigator, and steward, and a crew chief.
- John: I flew in those. Not as a pilot, as a passenger. That was a good airplane. Big.
- Ernest: On that good will tour, we went down to Rio, and was there for five days. And in the evening, the first night, the president threw a big official reception. Next night, the ambassador. And so on down the line.
- John: Party. Party.
- Ernest: And the officers on the crew were included in on all those receptions. And then they Brazilian Air Force assigned a lieutenant to the officers on the crew, and his sole duty while we were in Rio was to pick up the checks.
- John: Okay.
- Ernest: And they assigned a car and driver on a twenty-four hour basis. And it was a pretty nice trip.
- John: I can imagine.
- Ernest: And we left there and came back up, overnight in Panama. And then on into Mexico City, which was just a repeat of the same thing down at Rio.
- John: Pretty good life.
- Ernest: It was. And I said at the time, after that, those three weeks, I lived like a king.
- John: Did you have any problems when you were flying with him? Any weather problems? Mechanical problems?
- Ernest: No, not really. We kept the plane in actually top shape and every place we landed, we had a guard on the plane all the time. And we were fortunate, we didn't run into anything. Lot of trouble that way.
- John: How long were you with Eisenhower?

Ernest: About a year. Then when he got out of the service, and went to Cornell University as president, but when he went up there, I was transferred into Special Air Missions at Bowling Field out of there, which included the whole top Army, Navy brass, congressmen, senators, some foreign dignitaries, so on. That was good duty, too.

John: How long did you stay in the Air Corps?

Ernest: Six and a half years, total. I got out the first of April, '48.

John: Oh, okay. You had quite a career in there. What did you do when you got out?

Ernest: I went with the Marietta Concrete Corporation, at Marietta, Ohio. And we were just getting a new Beech D18.

John: As a pilot?

Ernest: Twin engine plane. And I went with them for ten years, as a corporate pilot with them. And that gave me more flying there.

John: Was that primarily around this country?

Ernest: It varied. It covered the whole forty-eight states. All domestic flying.

John: My brother worked for a company that had a corporate plane. I can't think of the name of the company. And they had a bar in the plane. And they had a sign saying, "No drinking until after five." And they had a clock where all the numbers were 5. I can't remember the name of the company. That's interesting. What did you do after that? Did you keep flying?

Ernest: Why, I stayed with the company. They manufactured, among other things, silos, concrete silos. And so I went with the silo division of the company, there in Marietta, for a while. And transferred to the plant manager over in Baltimore, Maryland. There were a whole series of mergers, then the Madison Silo Company, up here in Madison. Went from Marietta Concrete to American Marietta, to Martin Marietta.

John: Okay, I know Martin.

Ernest: And then Madison Silo joined in that deal. And then I was transferred to the engineering department back here in Madison, so I came out here. In 1970.

John: I always wondered where Martin and Marietta got together, because you always

hear Martin Marietta. What was the difference from being a pilot, where you are pretty much in command of things, and then working for a big company? Was there a transition there?

Ernest: Oh, not too much. I wouldn't say there was a whole lot of difference there.

John: Let me ask you a question that I ask all the men and women I interview. You were a young man, just out of college. You did go in the Air Corps before the war, but this awful war happened to you. You got grabbed and hauled out of civilian life, and sent in harm's way. How did you feel about that?

Ernest: Oh, you mean comparing army life with civilian life?

John: Not so much comparing them as you got sent into harm's way. You could have been killed. And this happened to you. You didn't make it happen. What did you feel about it. Were you mad? How did you feel about that happening to you?

Ernest: I don't know. I thoroughly enjoyed working with the company. Well, the president of Marietta Concrete was extremely nice to work for. And made it very pleasant. I mean, he was the type of fellow, if we were going out on a trip, and wasn't loaded, "Why don't you bring your wife along?"

John: Oh, wonderful.

Ernest: That made a big difference. As a matter of fact, I was with the company when I got married, and told him I was getting married. And he said, "Well, I don't know if this will fit into your plans or not, but I've got things I need to do down in Florida. And if you want to, you can bring your wife. We'll fly down to Florida. When we get down there, you can get lost for a couple of weeks." That was the kind of fellow he was to work for.

John: That is the first time I've heard of a guy who had to work on his honeymoon, and liked it. That says a lot about him. He must have thought very highly of you. Well, this is a great story. You like flying?

Ernest: Oh, very much. Here we go back to the beginning. Ever since I was a kid on the farm, occasionally at that time, there would be a plane fly over. And that's what I wanted to do. So all the way through high school, I thought about flying. And mother always said, "Of all the things there are in the country for a young man to do, why do you want to fly?" Well, that is what I wanted to do. At Ohio State, they had the civilian pilot training, and I checked it out, as much as I could find out about it. And then that weekend, when I went home, and told the folks what I had found out about it, Dad, he was either way. But Mother, she was still against

it. So Dad finally said, “Ernie, if that is what you want to do, I’m not going to stand in your way. If I said no, you’d hold it against me for life.”

John: That’s true.

Ernest: Then Mother came around. Then I told her I had already signed up for it. I always, like I say, all the way back, I wanted to fly. Well, that was before Pearl Harbor, when I went in. The fellows that were in cadets at that time were all there because that is what we wanted to do. We wanted to fly. It wasn’t avoid the draft, or anything. It was because we wanted to fly. I’ve seen quite a few big six-foot, strapping guys come back from a check ride sitting on the ground crying like a baby. They washed out. But it was, at that time, because we wanted to fly, period.

John: What was your major in college?

Ernest: I was in the college of agriculture. I majored in horticulture. Like a lot of college fellows, after leaving school, a lot of different areas from what they were majoring in, too.

John: I worked for one of the richest, wealthiest men in Ohio. Who was an English major in college. This is a fantastic story. We don’t want to run too long, because you want to get out of here. You have an appointment. Let me, I am going to turn this off. If you think of anything you want to put on it, let me know.

**[End of Interview]**