

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ERNEST H. TRESCH
Pilot, Army Air Corps, World War II
1995

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Tresch, Ernest H., (1917-2009). Oral History Interview, 1995.

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

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

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 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. Tresch talks about enlisting through the Aviation Cadet program and training in Texas and at MacDill Field (Florida). He talks about bombing targets, air defenses, and the effectiveness of his missions. Tresch describes memorable missions in Palermo (Sicily) and Rome (Italy). He characterizes his crew and declares he did not like flying B26s at first but grew to love them. Tresch addresses feelings of tension and the few recreation options on the base. He speaks of getting time on four-engine planes and flying "Crescent Airlines," which ran supplies overseas and took wounded back home. He portrays getting an offer over the phone to interview for General Eisenhower's crew and meeting him in Frankfurt (Germany). Tresch talks about flying the General to the States to be appointed Chief of Staff, on an inspection tour of the Pacific, and on a reception-heavy goodwill tour to Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). He comments on General Eisenhower's traveling companions and what he chatted about with the pilots. After the General left to claim presidency of Columbia University, Tresch mentions transferring to the 1st Special Air Mission Squadron and flying VIPs out of Bowling Field (Washington). After leaving the service, he talks about working as a pilot and then as a manager for the Marietta Concrete Corporation and its divisions. Tresch mentions joining the American Legion for social reasons and maintaining contact with other members of his crew.

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 and flew on missions with the 320th Bomb Group 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 Mark Van Ells, 1995.

Draft transcript by WDVA Staff, 1998.

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Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

Mark: Today's date is August 31, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, from the Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Ernie Tresch, of Oregon, Wisconsin. A veteran of the World War II, during the war he served as the pilot to General Eisenhower. It's quite a treat actually.

Tresch: Only too glad to.

Mark: Thanks for coming in this afternoon. Appreciate you driving all the way in from Oregon. I feel we should start by having you tell me about where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Tresch: Well, I was born and raised in Southeastern Ohio. Down near Marietta born and raised on a farm. Did farm work during grade school and high school time. Then I went to Ohio State University. While I was at the University, why I had the opportunity to get into the civilian pilot training program. Upon completion of that I applied for Aviation Cadet program.

Mark: When was this?

Tresch: 1941.

Mark: I see.

Tresch: The summer of '41.

Mark: So the war had started in Europe already the war had started?

Tresch: Oh yes. Yes sir. I was sworn into the Aviation Cadets on November 7, 1941. Thirty days before Pearl Harbor, which is a day I remember. Then I went into Cadet training down in Texas. On Sunday December 7th, I was out on the flight line with the lieutenant at the time and he was showing us some of the airplanes. When we came in at the main gate, the guard on duty said what had happened. There was about five of us cadets and the lieutenant turned around to us and said, "Well boys you can send your civvies home you, are not going to be needing them for awhile." [Laughs]

Mark: Which turned out to be true?

Tresch: He was right.

Mark: After the attack, how did things change for you as an Aviation Cadet?

- Tresch: Not too much, the training might have stepped up just a little bit faster. But it was basically the same training as what the cadets had before then.
- Mark: Which was?
- Tresch: Well, the ground school and flight training.
- Mark: So, it was basically how to fly the plane, did you sit in a class and learn the controls and sticks, then you actually get into the planes?
- Tresch: Well, the ground school is included oh meteorology and navigation and radio communications and all of that. Then about half the time was devoted to ground school on basic military problems. Then the flight training was actually getting out and learning to fly. Like I mentioned earlier that I had civilian pilot training before I went into the service. So I had over 100 hours of flying time before that. It was a help to have it behind me when I went in.
- Mark: I'm sure it was. So what kind of planes were you flying at this time?
- Tresch: The initial planes were in the primary training was what they called the PT-19. From primary training we went to basic training and we were flying BT-13. After completion of that I went to Single Engine Advance School, which is flying an AT-6. I got my commission there at Moor Field Mission, Texas on July 3rd of 41.
- Mark: What was your ultimate goal? Was it to be a fighter pilot like many other people? Or did you have less glamorous goals? [Laughs]
- Tresch: Well, to be honest, when I was in basic training I wanted to go to Twin Engine Advanced.
- Mark: Like cargo planes and bombers?
- Tresch: I wanted to get into heavy equipment, because after the war I was looking towards possible commercial flying. I thought that the heavier equipment would be more adaptable to civilian life compared to what the fighters were. But while I was in basic there towards the tail end I went to the base commander requesting Twin Engine Advanced. He looked at me and just grinned. He says "You little SOB--you are just what we are looking for a fighter pilot." So I went to Single Engine Advanced. But when we got our commission we had a choice of three fields to report to for active duty. While I was in training I heard that they had the B-17 out at MacDill Field down in Tampa Florida. So I put that in as my number one request and that is the way my orders came through. I had a thirty-day delay enroute to report for active duty. During that

thirty-day period of time they moved that B-17 and brought in a group of B-26's in so that's where I got initiated into the Martin B-26 and went on into combat from that.

Mark: After MacDill, where did you go?

Tresch: Went on up to Fort Wayne Indiana and picked up new airplanes up there and then flew across the South Atlantic into North Africa. I went into--I flew all of them combat missions out of North Africa.

Mark: Where were you at in North Africa? Algiers, or something?

Tresch: Well, our first base was at Oran and from Oran we moved on up closer to the front to Monegasque then up to Miascal, which was right outside of Tumus.

Mark: You were flying missions I suppose against Italy and Southern France. Could you describe some of the missions you were flying?

Tresch: All of our bombing missions were initially bombing North Africa. When they were chasing Rommel back up the coast. We were helping out on that. Then we were bombing Sicily, Italy and Sardinia.

Mark: You were the pilot of a B-24?

Tresch: B-26.

Mark: B-26 right you said that? So, I suppose it was a lot of interdiction of supply lines, I'm interested in what your target was?

Tresch: Mainly railroad yards, airports, and then during the invasion of Italy we were flying in there. The Germans were up on the banks and had the Navy pinned down. They couldn't land the artillery so we were working very intensively on gun positions. We were to knock them out so the troops could land.

Mark: Were these missions effective, from your prospective?

Tresch: Oh yes, very definitely, very definitely. There was one mission I will never forget; that was where we hit Palermo Sicily on Mothers day of '43. The town itself had never been bombed before, but the shipyards had been hit once. So it was before the invasion of Sicily and the Germans and the Italians had little headquarters set up all through town. So they decided that a bunch of that should be neutralized. They pulled a coordinated mission with all the bombers of North Africa to hit Palermo that day. There was three groups of B-17, three groups of B-24 two groups of B-25 and two groups of B-26, with oh thirty six ships to a group. Each one of us had a split home load of half-1000

pound demolition bombs and half anti personal or Frag bombs. We came in over the town we made formation all coordinated together in a big wide turn out over the Mediterranean and came across town and headed right back for Africa. Like I said, the town had never been hit before and everybody was running up on to the rooftops to watch the bombing of the docks and that wasn't the target at all. It was terrific! I came off that target with 89 holes in the airplane.

Mark: I was going to ask you, my next question was going to be; what sort of air defenses did the Germans and Italians have and how effective were they?

Tresch: They had- they were very effective with the 88 millimeter anti aircraft gun. Of course the 109 fighters, we ran into a lot of them too. But very, very fortunately I never had a man on my crew scratched on forty missions.

Mark: Which is pretty remarkable! Speaking of your crew, I interested in the plane and in the other men on the airplane, if you could describe some of the crew-members, their missions and their personalities? How did everyone get along on the plane?

Tresch: Well, the crew was made up of pilot, the co pilot, a navigator, a waist gunner, turret gunner, and the tail gunner. The waist gunner doubled as the engineer most of the time. We maintained this same crew pretty much all the way through. The only break was if somebody happened to be sick or something unforeseen. Why we were flying the same crew pretty much all the time now. I had two of the fellows that had started out with me as co pilots, that later on during there, they got their own crews so that brought a new man in then. On an over-all picture we got to know one another extremely well.

Mark: I would imagine you would have to.

Tresch: Right, right.

Mark: As for the plane itself, what did you think about the B-26 as a bomber?

Tresch: To start with, I didn't like it at all. It was a plane with very high wing loading; single engine operation wasn't anything to brag about at all. After we got into combat why we got shot up pretty bad there and it kept dragging us back home. After I got into combat with it why I really fell in love with the airplane. I liked it very much. When I was in training down at Tampa Bay near Mac Dill Field there was a saying going around that time "One a day in Tampa Bay." so that wasn't very much of a morale builder either. After I got into combat why I really fell in love with them.

Mark: Very durable and dependable?

Tresch: Right, right.

Mark: Now, as you see World War II movies, they stereotype the World War II Bombers especially. They show where the crew will mock up the planes by giving them a name, put the naked lady on the side. Did you have some art-work done on yours?

Tresch: No, I didn't have any on mine. I rotated planes some and so I didn't have the same plane all the way through so I didn't have any art work on that.

Mark: As for combat, we discussed the Palermo raid, were there others that stick in your mind as typical or exceptional?

Tresch: Well, I was on the mission the first time that Rome was bombed. Our target on that was the part of the group to hit the airport and part was to hit the railroad yards. We didn't run into nearly a fighter or anti aircraft fire that was anticipated. You think in terms in Rome why if anything is going to be defended that's it, see. But it wasn't--oh we ran into anti aircraft and fighters but it wasn't anything compared to what some of the others were.

Mark: Now, in terms of their air defenses, as time went on did their air defenses with the X's power get better or did they get worse or did they pretty much stay as effective as they had been?

Tresch: At that time they remained pretty constant, later on they got kicked around pretty bad and started tapering off. But at that time they were holding up in good shape.

Mark: As I think you mentioned you flew forty missions? That's quite a few, I'm interested in sort of--how you stand up to that psychologically? How do you keep getting in the plane and keep going up there? I mean thinking your life is going to be in danger every time.

Tresch: Actually, most of us felt it was a job that had to be done, and we weren't too much concerned about it. We knew that we were going to have a lot of casualties. There wasn't any question about that, but it was going to be the other guy. I don't know. Well it kept building up, I mean tension kept building up. Towards the last four or five missions I was on, we had to fill out a report after each mission as to the plane damage and anything that was wrong with the plane so on like that. As long as we were flying, we were flying in tight formation all the time and as long as we were flying everything was fine. Get back on the ground and taxi back to the parking area--I had to get somebody else to fill out the forms the last few ones.

- Mark: Shaking hands?
- Tresch: No, when I came back to the States to pick up a cup of coffee and I had to pick it up with both hands, like that.
- Mark: Was this after the war or just when you got back? I'm not sure when you got back to the States?
- Tresch: I got back to the States in December of '43.
- Mark: Oh, I see.
- Tresch: It was telling on the fellows very definitely.
- Mark: So, when did you stop flying missions in the Mediterranean?
- Tresch: I flew my last mission on November 2nd of '43.
- Mark: Was there a set limit?
- Tresch: Well, we had to fly there in North Africa, it was set that we had to fly forty missions to get rotated back to the states.
- Mark: I see, so you had completed you forty missions.
- Tresch: That was November 2nd was the last mission.
- Mark: I see. I want to go back a little bit.
- Tresch: Yeah.
- Mark: When you were in Africa, when you weren't flying a mission what did you do to occupy your time? What sort of activities were at the base if any, card playing or what ever? Did you get to go into town at all and experience some of that?
- Tresch: Yeah. Well, there was card playing and so on. There wasn't anything set up as far as any formal athletic activity or anything of that nature.
- Mark: No volleyball leagues or anything?
- Tresch: Very little of that. But well see I got into--I flew my first mission it was along in March or April I guess it was. We were busy with the airplane and yes we had some time off where we could go to town if there was a town available. Like when I was in Macao, we were about 18 miles out of Tunis, so we could

get into Tunis. When we first got over there, we were just outside of Oran and we could get into Oran when we weren't on anything else.

Mark: But you stayed pretty busy I take it?

Tresch: Oh yes.

Mark: So, you finished forty missions and you go back to the states, this must be where General Eisenhower comes in? What happened when you got back to the states? How long was it till you got that assignment? How did you come across that?

Tresch: When I came back to the states and rotated why I got in to the Air Transport Command. At that time we were ferrying airplanes from one field to the next. I mean if this field over here needed an airplane, we would pick it up from the factory and take it over or whatever. When I reported in there the operations officer asked me if what I had been flying and what I wanted to do and so on. I told him I would like to get in to a 4-engine as quick as I could, if I could. So he said, "Well, you help out on this for a little while and I will send you down to Birmingham to get you a 4-engine check out. Then you can check out and get you some time built up on the 4-engine and then transfer you to a C-54 outfit." Which was located there in Wilmington, Delaware. So after I built up something over 100 hours of 4-engine time, went down to get checked out. As far as this overseas run they called it Crescent Airlines. To get a check out on that, why it was a very extensive in a very, very good six-week training program of 4-engine equipment, basically on C-54. So after I got that check out, I was flying supplies over to Paris and flying wounded back. We got a couple of days off for every trip we were out on. I was back in and off on one of those trips and I was living in an apartment in down town Wilmington. I got a call down there and the base commander said one of Eisenhower's pilots was getting out of the service that he was interviewing for a replacement and wanted to know if I could come out for an interview or not. So I said sure, I wasn't doing anything. So I went out and after the interview I came back out through operations, I told the operations operator there that I didn't expect to every hear anything more of that. But I did say if I do why I will be down at the apartment. The next morning about 7:00 the telephone rang and they asked for Lieutenant Tresch. I said, "Speaking." he said, "This is General George" he says, "Do you have any relatives living in Germany?" I said, "Not that I know of." "Thank you." and he just hung up. That afternoon I had my orders to join General Eisenhower crew in Frankfort Germany. How I got it I have no more idea than you do. Because I didn't have any military pull or political pull or anything, but it was just the way I mentioned to you now, that was it.

Mark: So it was an exciting assignment.

- Tresch: Oh, very differently.
- Mark: He was in Frankfort you said?
- Tresch: Right. That was when he was a Supreme Commander of Allied Forces.
- Mark: It was after VE day how much longer after that was it? Was it the summer of '45?
- Tresch: Let's see, I joined his crew about six weeks before he was appointed Chief of Staff, Army Chief of Staff. We brought him back to the states on that. That was a real interesting assignment.
- Mark: I'm sure it was, because he was the big hero by this time.
- Tresch: You bet.
- Mark: Do you recall when you met him? Were you introduced to him?
- Tresch: I reported in to his office was, the headquarters office was in the IG Faber building there in Frankfort, Germany. I reported into the building there and went up to his office and the secretary took me in and introduced me to the General. That was where I first met him.
- Mark: What were your impressions at the time? What were you thinking as you were shaking General Eisenhower's hand? I suppose you were actually saluting him. But what's going through your mind?
- Tresch: Why, I don't really know, there was a certain amount of anxiety to it and so on. At that time you are young and weren't considering it too much.
- Mark: So, what did he say? Was it a hello how are you doing?
- Tresch: It was a just a very brief greeting. And then right back to duty again.
- Mark: So, you flew the General where? How many missions did you fly, where did you take him to?
- Tresch: Well, like I said I joined the crew about six weeks before he came back to the states. We didn't do a lot of flying there in Continental Europe at the time. We made a couple of runs into Berlin, and a few little side trips but nothing big at all. Then when he came back to the states and he was appointed Chief of Staff. We flew him back here and then shortly after he was appointed Chief of Staff he made a tour of inspection of the Pacific, and we took him on that

run. We hit the islands going out, Manila, Tokyo, Seoul Korea, Shanghai then hit the islands coming back.

Mark: It sounds like quite an excursion?

Tresch: It was.

Mark: What sort of impressions did you have of Europe as post war period and in Asia? Did they seem destroyed by the war?

Tresch: There in Frankfort they were pretty hard hit. They were demoralized, but they were pretty hard hit there in Frankfort. We didn't get out in the countryside while I was there at all.

Mark: In Germany?

Tresch: No. On this one trip to the Pacific, we hadn't gone out in this area a whole lot. I mean like; when we went into Manila, why we were officers of the crew. And we were in on all the briefings from Mac Arthur with all the maps and showing all that transpired and plans for the future and so on. As far as getting out into the society we didn't have the opportunity to do that.

Mark: So, what sort of entourage did the General travel with? I assume he has staff members, press core is brought in?

Tresch: We didn't have too much with the press cores. We had ranking military personal on board, not too much press core. Like on that trip why Mrs. Eisenhower was on board, oh a couple secretaries and so on. After we came back off of that run, it wasn't too long till he made that good will tour into Rio de Janeiro. We took him down on that and on that flight we had General Eisenhower with 5 star, General Vandenberg with at that time 3 star later he made 4 star but at that time he was 3 star, General Snider and Cerium Peterson were 2 stars apiece.

Mark: That's a lot of brass on that plane.

Tresch: There was a lot of hell raising about that too!

Mark: What do you mean?

Tresch: That much rank aboard one airplane at one time.

Mark: I suppose if it crashes it's a never good thing, but that would be a particularly bad thing. So on these trips did you actually get to see the General very much? Did you get to talk to him?

- Tresch: Oh yeah, oh yeah when we were on flights like that one, like I mentioned in the article there that he would come up to the cock pit and shoot the breeze with us some. He had a commercial license himself.
- Mark: Oh is that right.
- Tresch: It wasn't generally known, but he did have.
- Mark: Did you let him fly the plane?
- Tresch: Oh a little bit. But--
- Mark: So if General Eisenhower wants to shoot the breeze, what does he talk about?
- Tresch: Oh, most of it was on the lighter side, current events and so on. But if there is some specific instance that had happened or anything, it was just general conversation.
- Mark: He wasn't divulging any national secrets?
- Tresch: Not too much. Sometimes when we took him back to Europe, a couple of times. On one of them they were doing some planning as far as new airports in Italy. He had us with him when he was going over the maps on that and so on, which was all top secret material. We got in on some of it, but not too much. We had a good will tour down in Rio, being a good will trip the first night we were down there the President of Brazil threw a reception and the next night the Ambassador and so on down the line every night we were down there. The officers that were on the crew were included in on all those receptions. They really put on a reception too!
- Mark: Not bad duty!
- Tresch: No. [Laughs]
- Mark: So, your assignment with Eisenhower ended when?
- Tresch: Before he went to claim his Presidency Columbia University.
- Mark: That was about 48 or so?
- Tresch: No that was before that. Let me see, that must have been off the top of my head 56, I mean 46.
- Mark: So, after that assignment ended, did you get out of the service?

Tresch: No.

Mark: Did you stay in?

Tresch: No, I was transferred from his crew into First Special Air Mission Squadron they're in Bowling Field there in Washington. We were flying VIPs out of there all the time. Which included congressmen, senators, cabinet members, military top brass, well it was just VIP flying that's all. I was on that up until when I got out of the service in 48.

Mark: After the service then you had to go make a living and everything?

Tresch: Umm huh.

Mark: Did you get fly planes for a living? Is that what you did?

Tresch: [Laughs]

Mark: Good for you!

Tresch: No I--

Mark: Did you work for a company or an airline?

Tresch: A company. There was a company there in Marionette, Ohio that Marietta Concrete Corporation. They had a twin engine Beach Craft and I knew the president of the company very well, he was a very good family friend. So when I got out of the service I went him as a pilot for corporate airplane for another 10 years then.

Mark: When did you get to Wisconsin, out of curiosity?

Tresch: I came to Wisconsin in January, 70.

Mark: Did you find a job here or something?

Tresch: Correct. Why, it was through a series of company moves, when the company sold their airplane I stayed on with the company in the farm silo division. In '63 they had a plant in Baltimore, Maryland and I went over there as plant manager in '63 until 1970 when I came out here. In the mean time there had been several company mergers there and I wound up here with the Madison Silo Company which was a division of Martin-Marietta at that time. I was with them till I retired.

Mark: I have a couple more questions about the post war era. And that will pretty much going to do it then. After the war you found a job so you didn't use the GI Bill program or anything like that?

Tresch: No.

Mark: You didn't have any need for that sort of thing?

Tresch: No.

Mark: Were there other benefits that you used? Was it either Federal or States?

Tresch: I didn't use any federal benefits anywhere along the line.

Mark: You were able to finance the home by yourself. In terms of medical or physiological problems did you have any problems after the war in that regard?

Tresch: No, I mean like I mentioned earlier, when I first came back to the states I was extremely nervous and so on. But I mean gradually you worked out of that and no major medical problems or anything along the line at all.

Mark: I guess that wasn't a Malaria environment in North Africa. So that probably wasn't going to be a problem for anyone.

Tresch: There was a lot of malaria in North Africa.

Mark: Oh, was there?

Tresch: But we were taking our Quinine pills and so on to help prevent it.

Mark: So, that sort of thing didn't plague you on the way home?

Tresch: No, no.

Mark: I just have one last thing and that is veteran's organizations and unions that sort of thing. Have you joined any of the major groups like the American Legion or the VFW, or did you join any smaller ones?

Tresch: I joined the American Legion there in Marionette, Ohio.

Mark: When was this?

Tresch: Right after I came back. I carried my membership for 25 years. I didn't join the VFW; as a matter of fact I just didn't want to get spread to doggoned thin. But I very much enjoyed the American Legion though.

Mark: What possessed you to join in the first place? Why did you join the Legion was it for social activities?

Tresch: Primarily social.

Mark: Have you been to any reunions of say your crew or your wing anything like that?

Tresch: No, no I have kept in contact with part of the crew. My tail gunner, we still exchange Christmas cards and phone calls at Christmas time. Coincidentally his name was Jimmy Do Little!

Mark: Oh, is that right?

Tresch: Yes. [Laughs]

Mark: Not the original Jimmy Do Little?

Tresch: Not the, but we maintained contact though.

Mark: I see but nothing formal?

Tresch: No, no.

Mark: No groups or organizations.

Tresch: Our group in North Africa they have had conventions, but I haven't been able... there are various things that I haven't been able to attend any of them. But they have a reunion every two years.

Mark: Those are all my questions, is there anything you would like to add? Is there anything I skipped over too quickly?

Tresch: I don't believe so, I mean if you go over this other and anything comes up why give me a call and I will be glad to fill you in on any questions that do come up.

Mark: Well, thanks for coming in, I really appreciate it.

[End of interview]