

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
CARLYLE A. VAN SELUS
Ball Turret Gunner, Army Air Corps, WWII
1996

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Van Selus, Carlyle A., (1922-). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 2 audio cassettes (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recording: 1 audio cassette (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

The Portage, Wis. airman discusses his World War II service as the ball turret gunner with the 92nd Bomb Group, 326th Bomb Squadron of the Army Air Force and his experiences when his airplane was shot down and he found safety with the French underground. He talks about basic training at Kessler Field (Mississippi) and gunnery school at Tindall Field (Florida). Van Selus mentions the adjustment to military discipline, living in a tent city in Florida, and meeting people from all over the United States. Van Selus describes his reason for volunteering to be the ball turret gunner, meeting the other members of his crew, the personalities of his crew members, receiving his uniform and weapons, and trip overseas. Stationed in England, he touches upon the food, his first mission, and feelings seeing people he trained with killed. Van Selus comments on life on an Air Force base including interactions with English civilians, competition for English women to date, riding a bicycle around base, and daily equipment maintenance. He compares and evaluates different types of flak, the B17 and B24 airplanes, the different challenges in bombing France and Germany, and American and German aircraft. Van Selus provides a detailed account of the mission when his plane was shot down including seeing the waist gunner hit by flak, bailing out with the other crew members, seeing his airplane explode, landing in France, and cursory examination by German soldiers. He discusses the uncertainty of being in enemy territory, being cared for by a French Family, and interrogation by the French underground to confirm he was American. Van Selus details the assistance of the underground in leaving France including the detailed escape plan, receiving a fake passport, learning how to pass as French, and pretend marriage to a French woman in order to leave Paris. He eventually reached England where he was told he could not talk about his experience in France nor could he fly again. He touches upon interrogation by the American Air Force, return to the United States, visiting with his parents, working as an instructor in Texas, flying a B29, and supervising women at the Laredo (Texas) base. He touches upon his use of the GI Bill, settling in Pardeeville (Wis.) after the war, combat related nightmares, membership in the American Legion, and the importance of interacting with other combat veterans.

Biographical Sketch

Van Selus (b. January 15, 1923) served with the 2126th Army Air Force, 92nd Bomb Group, 326th Bomb Squadron in Europe during World War II. He was shot down on his 13th mission and escaped from the Germans with the help of the French underground.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcription by Cindy Thomas, 2003.

Transcription edited by Christine Koller and Abigail Miller, 2003.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay. Today's date is August the 28th, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Carlyle Van Selus, a native of Portage and a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, Army Air Force in World War II. Good morning, and thanks for coming in.

Van Selus: Thank you.

Mark: All the way from Colorado.

Van Selus: Um-hum.

Mark: I suppose we should start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Van Selus: Okay. I was born in Vesta Township, Minnesota, January 15th, 1923. My mother died when I was a year old so I was actually raised by my grandparents. Went to school in Belview, Minnesota, and Echo, Minnesota, until through my sophomore year. Then moved to Wisconsin to live with my father and stepmother and went to high school in Portage, graduated in 1941. That was the year of Pearl Harbor, of course, and at that time I was enrolled at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. I remember a Sunday afternoon sitting there with my roommate studying when we heard the announcement of Pearl Harbor. Shortly after that, I went--I was still at Milwaukee School of Engineering, but went to work for Allis Chalmers as a welder in a Navy factory. Then November 17th, 1942, I enlisted in the Air Force, Army Air Force at that time.

Mark: Now, that was difficult to get into for some people. The Air Force is fairly selective. I'm interested in (A) why you--why you wanted to go in the Air Force; and (B) how did you go about getting in.

Van Selus: Boy, I don't know why. I certainly didn't want to be in the Army. I thought about foot soldier, but flying appealed to me, even though at that time flying was not a major thing. We didn't have major airlines, so—but flying did appeal to me. I wasn't interested in the Navy. So I just went down and enlisted, and had no problems. Left I think the next day for Fort Sheridan, Illinois, just for a short two or three days. From there, went to Keesler Field, Mississippi, for basic 0001 training. Two weeks later, they were asking for gunners, and that really appealed to me and I volunteered right now, and left immediately.

Mark: What was so appealing about gunnery?

Van Selus: Flying.

Mark: It was an opportunity to fly.

Van Selus: Yeah. So I left from there and went to Tyndall Field, Florida. Probably the best training I had all the time I was in the service, because they operated just like the cadet system at Pensacola, which is right next door. Did a lot of flying. Everything was--everything was gunnery. Very difficult school, white glove inspections, and when you left the barracks you had to run, all that type of thing, so it was excellent training. Didn't realize it at the time, but there was a reason for it--discipline. When you're flying, you don't argue about what you're told to do.

Mark: Yeah. I want to go back to your basic training—

Van Selus: Okay.

Mark: --and ask about questions like discipline and that sort of thing. Sometimes young men and women have difficulty adjusting to military life, basic training is often where they weed these sorts of people out, so when you got to basic training, did you have any troubles adjusting to the discipline—

Van Selus: No, no.

Mark: --the strict behavior, discipline sort of thing?

Van Selus: I think things today are so different than they were back then, and I don't think that discipline was--was a major problem.

Mark: For what reason?

Van Selus: I think we were brought up differently. Back then, you didn't question--I didn't question my folks when I was told to do something, not that we're better people or anything, but we were just raised that way.

The thing I remember about basic training that I didn't like, we lived in tent city and several--several guys died, because it rained every day and then you'd be out on the drill field, when it rained, you had to roll up the sides of your tent, so your bunk was always wet. That part I didn't like. But it had nothing to do with--with why I wanted to be a gunner or anything like that.

Mark: Now, military service often brings people from different parts of the country together, especially in basic training, people from the East Coast, the West Coast, the South, wherever. Was that your experience? I mean, was it a mix of people from all different parts of the country, and if so, how did everyone get along and turn into soldiers? [unintelligible]

Van Selus: Everyone was in the same boat. We were there for the same reason. It was interesting. It was actually fascinating to meet guys from--well, especially people

who came from the South, the southern accent we weren't used to that, but they were just--felt the same way about us, our accents were so different, and it made a good mix, just like, oh, probably don't want to talk about this yet, but members of my crew, where they came from, all over the country, ten different men. So it was--it was interesting, and I mean, as young as we were, it was exciting.

Mark: So you finished your basic training at Teedler--Tyndall Field, was it, Florida?

Van Selus: Tyndall Field, Florida, right?

Mark: And you eventually became a ball turret gunner?

Van Selus: Um-hum.

Mark: Now, that's what you trained doing in Florida, I take it?

Van Selus: Oh.

Mark: Or was it just general gunnery?

Van Selus: No. Not at all. It wasn't until sometime later, and we'll get to that point, or I can tell you about it right now.

Mark: Go ahead.

Van Selus: Okay. From Tyndall Field, Florida, when I graduated from there, I went from buck private to a buck sergeant. You get three stripes right there, graduated. Went to Buckley Field, Denver, Colorado, for heavy bombardment training, which is bomb racks and that type of thing. Then from there, went to Salt Lake City for a little more training. Then to Ephrata, Washington. And that's where our crews were formed. How they formed them, I don't know. But each crew had to have a pilot, a full pilot, a bombardier, navigator, engineer, so on, and I wanted to be a ball turret gunner.

Mark: For what reason?

Van Selus: Just appealed to me. It was like flying my own plane. I was in the ball all by myself underneath, turret, operates 180 degrees in elevation, 360 degrees azimuth. You get a lot of sensations riding in that.

Mark: I betcha.

Van Selus: Along with the movement of the plane.

Mark: Now, you're also very vulnerable, if I'm not mistaken. You're sort of at the bottom of the plane and if you lose the landing gear, you're in big trouble.

Van Selus: That's why you couldn't be—

Mark: It's a dangerous profession to begin with, but that seems particularly dangerous place to be. Did that sort of thing appeal to the adventurous young man in you or—

Van Selus: I think so. Even to the point that you couldn't wear a parachute in the ball turret, so if you're in trouble, why, you had to get out of the ball turret and get a parachute on before you could even bail out. But being young like that, it's so easy to understand now why young people fly. I don't know if it's guts or the fact we didn't know any better, but it was exciting.

Mark: It's probably both, actually. So it was in Washington State that you met your crew?

Van Selus: Ephrata, Washington.

Mark: And your airplane, too. Did you get--did you get assigned to you the actual airplane you were going to be flying in combat?

Van Selus: No, no. Probably didn't even fly the same plane everyday in training.

Mark: Well, let's talk about your crew for a minute, because you mentioned them.

Van Selus: Okay.

Mark: They were also a good mix of people. You served with these people for quite a long time. Why don't you just go ahead and describe the different people and where they came from and their personalities.

Van Selus: Okay. We'll start with the nose of the plane, the bombardier. His name was Paralee (?). He was from Chicago. I thought that he was probably the most worthless position on the crew, because when you flew, if you're in the lead plane and the deputy lead plane, that bombardier was the one that determined when the bombs were dropped for everybody, all 20 some planes in the group, so in our--when the lead plane opened the bomb bay doors, everybody opened the bomb bay doors. When he dropped his bombs, everybody dropped the bombs. All you had to do was throw a switch. I can do that. Because at that time, the B-17 didn't have a nose turret or guns up there. Later on, then they had a chin turret. Then the bombardier used to operate that.

Mark: The bombardier was an officer, if I'm not mistaken.

Van Selus: Yes. They were all lieutenants, the four of them, the bombardier navigator, pilot, and copilot. The navigator was Jasper—James Williams from Jasper, Alabama. Deep southern accent. I enjoy him. Copilot was a little bit of a guy, even smaller

than I am and he was—his name was James Thorson (??), and he was from Florida. Pilot was older than we were, probably five or six years, at least.

Mark: So he was probably an old man about 24 or 25.

Van Selus: Yeah. Probably even 26 or 27. But he was an instructor pilot. He had over 5,000 hours of flying time, so he was a good pilot. In fact, he started out with P-38s, but so many pilots were killed in flying those things, he got out of them and went into bombers. Anyway, he was from Pennsylvania. Stump, our engineer, was from—Everet something--he was from West Virginia. Sitters (??), our radio operator was a little older. He was from Omaha, Nebraska. And then came the ball turret, which was me.

Then we had an interesting situation that--the waist gunners. There are two waist gunners. We had one called--his name was Smitty. I don't remember wher was from, because he went nuts on our first mission, he just lost it, so immediately he was grounded and broke in rank. And, let's see, who was our other one? Oh, Maxi Crabe (??), from Anderson, Indiana, was our other waist gunner. Unfortunately, he was killed on a mission over Brummond. And Higgins, our tail gunner, was from Bangor, Maine. So we came from spread out over the country pretty well

Mark: The four corners of the country, really.

Van Selus: Yep!

Mark: So your crew gathered in Washington. I assume you trained on a B-17?

Van Selus: Oh, yes, sir.

Mark: And when did you finally get overseas, and how did you get there?

Van Selus: Trained for two months in Ephrata, Washington. Then we were assigned to what was called the Keri (??) Provisional Group, which is 30 crews, which were replacement crews for crews that were lost overseas. At that time, we didn't know where we were going, however.

Mark: If I may interrupt for a second. When it came to where you were going, did you have a preference? Did you want to go to Europe? Did you want to go to the Pacific? Did you care much one way or the other?

Van Selus: Well, we--we guessed, because the major forces was in Europe. But it didn't make any difference, really. But from Ephrata, Washington, we trained there for two months. Then went to Rapid Cities Army Air Base for final training. In fact, wives, girlfriends could be there for that final month. Girlfriends couldn't live with boyfriends, however [laughs]. But it--it was important in the sense that I remember Lieutenant Ed Smith and his wife and they had a baby, and on the first mission that I

flew, he was flying off our left wing and his plane got a direct hit and exploded. There wasn't a parachute came out of it. That was a bad part about it knowing people that you trained with and they just disappear from life that quick. That--that was difficult. From there, we went to--to Topeka, Kansas, which is a staging area. I remember we were in this huger hangar-like building. Our crew sat at a picnic table and there was a captain at the end of the table, and everything was precise. The first thing he wanted to know was, asked the pilot, "Everyone in rank?" Well, it happened that Sitters, our radio operator, had gotten drunk and gotten broke and he was a buck private.

This captain said, "You're a staff sergeant right now." Just that easy. We were assigned all clothes, the clothes were war clothes, we knew just about where we were going. Got our weapon, a .45 caliber pistol, all our clothes, our records were brought up to date, and the next day we shipped out on a troop train, went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. They told us to be ready to leave on five minutes' notice, but they didn't know when it was going to be. And I remember when--we were there probably no more than four hours maybe and they called us out and it was after dark--and there was a reason for that--but it was raining, just pouring, and we were in formation on the road out in front of the barracks, got on a train and went to Brooklyn, New York, and to a large building and, still in formation, we dropped our gear, and we were served coffee and donuts, and each section went up the gang plank and we were on the Queen Mary, went to England--actually, Scotland on the Queen Mary.

Mark: Why don't you describe that trip for me. You were in the Air Force, but you had to develop some sea legs, I take it.

Van Selus: Well, yeah. The first day was exciting because--well, first of all, we weren't used to this kind of treatment being down on E Deck below the water line in hammocks and you could just barely walk between them. I don't remember if they were three high or what.

They took us up on deck. There were 18,000 men aboard that ship and they didn't have room for some of them so they--when they'd march aboard that ship, wherever they dropped their--their gear, that's where they stayed for five days. They had a big room that they used for a mess hall, and it was just like umpteen number of long tables and wherever you--when you marched in, wherever you stopped, that's where you sat and ate. Food was--I ate there once. The food was English and, oh, it was terrible.

Mark: Why was it terrible?

Van Selus: Tasteless, just--I don't know how anybody could eat that. It's a good thing they had a PX aboard because we lived on candy bars for those five days. And the first morning out, everybody almost went berserk because they--there were guns that were firing. We didn't know what it was. Here, they had balloons they got up and

they were practicing with antiaircraft gun and didn't tell us, of course. And when we--five days later we go to Glasgow, Scotland, and they couldn't dock, the bay wasn't deep enough, so we were brought ashore in small boats, and our troop train went down to England to an area called Fish Head, and that was the staging area.

A few days later, they would take a few crews at a time and ship you out, and we went with the 92nd bomb group Street (??) 26 bomb squadron at Pottington.

Mark: Where was that?

Van Selus: Between North Hampton and Rushton, 80 miles northwest of London. And when you start flying, you don't fly together as one crew. The first two people that flew from our crew was the pilot, who flew as a copilot, and I flew as a ball turret gunner on this--an older crew, just for that one mission, to get some experience.

Mark: And why don't you describe that first mission for me. If you--if you talk to a guy in the infantry, he talks about the Baptism of fire very often, which is the first exposure in combat. This would be the equivalent for you. This was a memorable experience.

Van Selus: It was, for the simple reason that--that was a mission I'll never forget, because that was the one where this Ed Smith was killed, flying right off--he was flying as the copilot. He was the first pilot brought on that mission, same as our pilot, he was flying as a copilot, and off our left wing. When that plane was hit, it just left formation and, flying away from us, all of a sudden, one big explosion. There goes ten men, and don't think that won't put its blawn in your mind.

Mark: This was a mission to where? What was--what was the target?

Van Selus: I don't remember.

Mark: My assumption might have been that it was--that they would, for, you know, new guys such as yourself, they would have sent you on a so-called milk run.

Van Selus: No.

Mark: This was a real combat mission?

Van Selus: Oh, yes. There wasn't such thing as milk runs. Well, shouldn't say that. I--I flew one that I considered a milk run, but it was probably the most dangerous mission that I flew. That is, later on we were supposed to hit a target, an air base that was giving shipping in the channel a lot of problems. We went in at 12,000 feet.

We didn't even wear oxygen. Normally we were flying at round 30-32,000 feet. That mission, 12,000. I can remember using my guns to fire at ground--at the ground at hangars, everything, just completely demolished the air base. That you

could call a milk run, but we didn't think so because we were like sitting ducks up there. B-17 is not like the jet aircraft of the day, where our top speed is probably 250 miles an hour. Guns probably on the ground aren't as good--weren't as good then, too, I don't know.

Mark: So you did 12 missions before you were finally shot down?

Van Selus: Shot down on my 13th.

Mark: Yeah. I want to save that one for--we'll discuss that one separately. As for the--as for the other 12, if you can briefly comment on the kinds of targets that you were striking, how many were air fields, how many were factories, etc., etc., just to get a sort of picture of what it was you were trying to do.

Van Selus: Some of those missions were quite interesting that were not just ordinary missions. I don't think we ever came back from a mission without some holes in our aircraft.

One of the missions that I flew, I don't even know what that target was, but if you picture a ball turret, the gunner lays on the door. You have a safety belt over your shoulders, and I had the door shot off, and the temperature was 55 below zero. The pilot told me to get out of the turret and go up in the radio room, and I asked for permission to stay, which I did. He said he'd just leave it up to me. Well, first of all, you lose two guns, and I wasn't about to just do nothing on that plane. That would drive you absolutely berserk. When you're fighting, it wasn't--it didn't bother you if--when you were firing at the enemy, you knew he was firing at you. The worst thing was the flak, antiaircraft.

There are different kinds of flak, and you just had to sit there and take that.

Mark: What was so unnerving about it? Was it the helplessness there was nothing you could do about it? Was it--

Van Selus: Yeah. Well, when they had--there are two kinds of flak. I remember we went to Brummond on a mission and the navigator called me and said, look ahead, and I went and looked and it was just--just like a solid black wall out there, and he had to fly through that. It was terrible to look at, but it was not nearly as dangerous as the concentrated flak. Concentrated flak, there were four bursts. When you saw the first one, everybody--anybody on the plane saw a burst of flak, called it in. Say, flak at 2 o'clock, level high, low, wherever it was. The next one's going to be closer and the third one's going to be real close and the fourth one will be a direct hit so the pilots would take evasive action, and that was--that was dangerous, and, of course, we all knew it, and that scares you. Man, you're getting shot at and there isn't a thing you can do about it except evasive action. But fighter attacks, I liked that a lot better than antiaircraft.

Mark: Well, see, this gets to the question I was going to ask you about, on a mission and in that airplane, what specifically is the specialty or the job of the ball turret gunner? Is it—

Van Selus: Anything below the plane. Anything below the plane.

Mark: This can be fighter aircraft or—

Van Selus: Oh, yeah. Any—[Unintelligible, both talking at once] Sure. You—you didn't have targets on the ground you were shooting at because you were up too high.

Mark: Yeah.

Van Selus: Yeah. You were just firing at other planes, but--Anyway, that—That mission we had the door shot off was probably as close as I came to dying on a mission because when they pulled me out of her, I was unconscious, both guns were frozen up, I froze my face hands, feet. But that's the way it was.

Mark: As for your plane, I assume--I assume that your crew eventually got a plane all to itself?

Van Selus: Oh, yes.

Mark: Now, of course, you watch the movies and it's sort of—the nose part is all romanticized and everything. Did you--I've found that not all crews actually did that sort of thing. Did your crew do that, did you put a little design on there, did you name the plane?

Van Selus: The picture of the girl on our plane was "Dotty I"—o "Dotty II." "Dotty I" was the previous crew that had named. Actually, the ground crew is--they're the ones that name the plane.

Mark: Is that right?

Van Selus: Yeah. That plane on the ground is theirs and they take a lot of pride in it. Ground crews and the flight crews were very close. You're dependent on one another.

Mark: So who's Dotty? I'm just curious.

Van Selus: We don't know.

Mark: Oh.

Van Selus: But we lost "Dotty II." We were on a three-day when another crew flew our plane and lost it. There's one of the old original all drab painted planes. This is early in war. There weren't any just aluminum colored planes. I can remember the first ones

that came over, they were just unpainted, man, everybody was scared to death to fly one of them. It turned out that they were harder to see. They were the best ones. They also had chin turrets in them. They were better. Now, where were we?

Mark: I was asking you about your plane. Now, there were many different kinds of bombers during World War II. You happened to be on the B-17.

Van Selus: The flying fortress.

Mark: What's the--in your view, having been on the plane and perhaps talking to others who have been on other planes, what were the strengths and weaknesses of that plane?

Van Selus: Okay. First of all, there were two major bombers, B-17, B-24s. B-24s were called the flying box cars. 17 is the flying fortress. The 24 is a little bit faster than B-17 but they couldn't get the altitude. Their missions were flying right around 20,000 feet. We would be anywhere from five to ten thousand feet higher. I remember when we were bombing--we were going to Hannover and they were going to Brunswick, or vice versa, and our paths crossed. They were a good 5,000 feet below us, which means they were getting shot at a lot more as far as flak was concerned, even though they were a little bit faster. No way did I want to fly a B-24. B-17s were the best aircraft at that time.

It was amazing how those things would fly. I saw some of them come back with holes in the side of them big enough you could drive a jeep in and they still flew. Practically all flight planes came back with one or two engines missing. We came back from one with two engines out.

December 31st, 1943, we flew a mission to--down to Bordeaux France. When you hit targets in France, you never bombed unless you could see the target. The Germans had laid a perfect smoke screen over the city of Bordeaux, whatever it was we were going to bomb there, so we had to go in and hit a secondary target, which was an air base. The problem was, we didn't have enough fuel to get home. When we came back to England, fog, really thick fog, and this is an everyday experience pretty much. Well, when you have 20-some bombers flying almost wing tip to wing tip, you're not going to fly formation in that kind of weather so everybody breaks up, and then everybody would stand by with their parachutes ready to bail out, because you'd feel a prop wash from another plane, you knew you were close, but the pilot was looking for a hole to go down. On that mission, he found a hole, went down, and when we landed, that plane must have bounced 50 feet in the air, and it was an English Air Force base, so we spent New Year's Eve there and we just had a ball.

Mark: I was going to ask about--about life when you weren't in combat and—

Van Selus: I'm sorry?

Mark: I was going to ask about life when you were not in combat when you were in England and sort of--sort of life of the airman in wartime England. You know, there's the old--there's the well-worn phrase that they were overpaid, oversexed, and over here. That there were some tensions between the British and the Americans, the GI with all the money and that sort of thing.

Van Selus: That's right. And that was—

Mark: What was your experience in that regard?

Van Selus: First of all, that is true. When you're on a three-day pass and go to London--we didn't get along well with the English. The Australians and Canadians, they were great, but the English, after all, we're in their country and we're taking their girlfriends and--because we did have more money than they had. Now I think back and I feel sorry for them, but not then. But other than a three-day pass, there wasn't a whole lot to do on an air base.

We did have a lot of meetings with--intelligence meetings mainly, that dealt with if you're shot down, what to do, but you don't have those all the time neither. So it was a matter of being around the barracks and playing cards and I wasn't--I wasn't one that gambled, but we did play cards.

Mark: Was there like the USO, USO shows or—

Van Selus: We didn't have one on our air base. To picture this, we had five air bases within our traffic pattern. That's a lot.

Mark: Yeah.

Van Selus: As far as--other than that, everybody had a bicycle, and wherever you went, you rode your bike, to the mess hall or headquarters or operations. And all the meetings were done in the operations office. Planes were disbursed all over the field. You cleaned your guns every day. Didn't make any difference if you were flying or not flying. When you came back from a mission, after the debriefing, you went back out to your plane, cleaned the guns, and the morning that you flew, you'd clean them again before you put them--they were in a tent and they had racks that we put them in. That was one of the big problems when I started flying in '43, they hadn't developed an oil yet and the guns would freeze, so you had to test-fire them every so often so they wouldn't freeze up. Well, you had to be careful not to test-fire them too much because they'd create so much heat and they'd freeze faster. But then they developed an oil called AXS 777, we just bathed the guns in that because it would not freeze and everything, so that solved that problem.

Mark: Well, I've got a couple more questions about air combat and then I want to talk about mission number 13.

Van Selus: I thought there was something else I wanted to talk about before we got to that one. Oh, one of the worst missions I flew was Tusoungin (??) in the Ruhr Valley. That was the industrial area, and, boy, did we get shot up on that one. I don't remember anything else about it except probably one of the worst missions that we flew. We lost a lot of aircraft on that one.

Mark: This sort of gets into one of the questions I was going to ask, and that is, in terms of the German air defenses, which--what was the most effective? Was it the fight? Was it the fighter? Was it the combination of the two?

Van Selus: Combination.

Mark: As a young guy in the ball turret, what did you fear the most from the Germans?

Van Selus: Well, you plan that as soon as you cross the coast you're going to get a lot of flak. And then after you got out of that area, then you pick up fighters. Well, in 1943, we didn't have many fighters, so we got shot up a lot. As time went on, we got into 1944, we started getting more fighter aircraft.

Mark: The mustangs started coming.

Van Selus: The mustangs, yeah, P-51s and P-47 thunderbolts. And going in on a long mission, you'd pick up some P-38s because they could go at a longer range than the others.

The only problem was the P-38 would lose superchargers and then they'd come up and fly in formation with us and we'd take them home, so we didn't think much of the P-38s. But, boy, P-51--saw some wonderful dogfights. Nothing that I have seen yet come close to actually watching one. But that's what I was going to talk about was on this mission that we flew down to Bordeaux, we had a P-51 come through our formation three times before we got him. He was alone. But here's our formation and--and you'd pick him up out here about 1500 yards, and when they start tipping that wing, they're starting to fire, because they're firing up here, but as they come closer, then they start rolling, so when they go by you, the belly their plane is to you, and that is heavily armored.

They're great pilots and they had good planes. You had to admire them. Their--their ME-109s every bit as good as our P-51, and FW-190 was as good as our P-47, and their pilots were as good as ours. The difference is, when they got shot down, they're probably up flying again the next day.

Mark: Whereas you guys had to somehow get back to England?

Van Selus: That's right. I was the first one that ever was shot down from the 92nd bomb group that escaped and got back to his home base.

- Mark: I just have one more question about air combat and then we'll talk about that mission, and that involves the bombing and the targets and the accuracy of the bombing. Now, again, you were an enlisted man in the ball turret, but from your perspective, could you get a sense of how accurate the bombing was? I mean, there's a lot of ink been spilled on how accurate the bombing was in World War II, the famous Norden bomb site and all these kinds of things. From your perspective, how accurate was it?
- Van Selus: Great. The Norden bomb site was excellent. The problem was that I couldn't see every one of them because they could bomb right through the clouds, which I couldn't see the targets, but the targets that I saw, boy, they would just wipe it out. When you have--well, we carried twelve 500-pounders, or 51 100-pound incendiaries. That's going to cause a big fire. Some of the 500-pounders were—had time delay fuses in them, so it was pretty risky to go in and try and rescue anything on the ground because you never knew when one of those things was going to go off. But, yeah, the bombing was excellent. The thing about it, any time we were over Germany, if for some reason you couldn't get to the target or--but you dropped your bombs on something, whether it was that target or not, but I would say—
- Mark: But in France, that was different?
- Van Selus: Oh, not in France.
- Mark: Because you mentioned in France you had to have a visual sighting of the targets.
- Van Selus: That's right.
- Mark: That wasn't the case over Germany, though?
- Van Selus: Oh, no, no. There were plenty of targets.
- Mark: It was the enemy country there.
- Van Selus: That's right.
- Mark: Okay. Mission number 13. I imagine that also sort of sticks in your mind. Why don't you just run through it.
- Van Selus: Oh, yeah. This will take a little time to tell this one.
- Mark: I've got it.
- Van Selus: February 8, 1944. We were the lead plane on--leading the whole group. Everything went wrong, to start with. I have to explain how a group is formed on a day of mission. When you take off, there are three squadrons. There are four squadrons in a group, but only three of those squadrons are going to fly with us in our group. So

they--we'll say in our squadron, 326, the tail gunner would have a gun similar to a flare gun that would—was we'll say red, and he would keep flashing that because it is still dark early in the morning, and so the planes that were in our group would just form on us because of--of that tail gunner. The other two squadrons, on might have a green light or whatever it was, and they'd form, and then the--those squadrons would form on us.

We would be flying here, and if it is stacked high, then the second squadron would be up here close, and the other one would be down here. Now, that's one element. Then the next one is stacked just the opposite way, a plane here, and high, and low. Everything from the ground looks like it's a perfect V, but it's not, because you can't be flying into the prop wash of the planes ahead of you. Okay. Getting back to that mission, we had a problem because the other squadrons didn't form where they should. You have a specific time that you have to leave the coast to go on a mission, formation or not. We had our squadron together, but the other squadrons weren't there, so we were actually flying alone that day.

Earlier, I talked about our waist gunner, Smitty, getting grounded. We got a new gunner then by the name of Francis Wall from Arkansas, a real good guy to fly with, a good gunner. Maxy Crabe had been killed over Brummond, and we got a waist gunner by the name of Scanlin (??), the best that I ever flew with. He had a lot of missions. He was flying his 24th or 25th mission with us, and you only had to fly 25. I say "only." Very few of them got 25. But he left the United States, went to Canada, joined the RCAF. When they went to England, he joined the RAF, and he had been to Berlin three times at night as a tail gunner with the English, and then he came over to the 8th Air Force and we got him. He--he was just a wonderful guy to fly with.

But that morning, he got hit with flak, and you have to picture wearing helmets, they were cloth helmets that we wore at that time, and your radio is in the helmet and stuff, and then an oxygen mask. One hit him in the cheek, went right through his cheek, took the jawbone, teeth, the whole works, and he was bleeding profusely, so--you can never turn back for an injured man aboard, you still had to continue the mission--so the pilot called the other waist gunner and told him to open his chute and stuff it under his arm.

Scanlin would have no part of it. He didn't want to do that. To make a long story short, he got a [unintelligible] and that would just clip onto your uniform, but when he was ready to bail out, we had a fighter attack and he got hit, and it actually knocked him out of the plane, and I watched and--from the ball turret, never saw a parachute open.

[END SIDE A, TAPE 1 OF 2]

I might as well go through this--no, I'll leave this. Remind me and go back and explain something about him. Then later that day, in the afternoon, we were hit, and

we were hit by a P-47--or FW-190s. When we were--we were hit from 12 o'clock, and the same old story, came out of the sun, they hit us. Anyway, I was waiting for them come down below the plane, and I never saw them. The thing that happened was our number two engine was hit, fire just wrapped right around the ball turret. I was sitting just like in the middle of the plane, so I rolled the ball up, went to get out, and had to hurry, of course. You have to remember at this point we were sitting there with a full bomb load, all your hundred octane gasoline filling the wings, all your oxygen equipment--oxygen is explosive--all your ammunition, man, it's--we saw too many of them just direct hit and blow up. And so I was struggling in that ball turret, but I had heavy boots on and my foot was caught in the stirrup and--and when I stood up--your hose comes from under the seat and it was a male-female connection--here, it came disconnected. When I fell outside of the turret, Francis Wall, the gunner from Arkansas, saw me. He reached over, and had to take a couple of steps to get over there, to plug me in on the main system, just flipped it over to pure oxygen. When I came to and realized what was going on, I went over and plugged into the system and grabbed the other waist gunner because he was the only--you know the other one was gone, and started firing, and I remember he tapped me on the shoulder, here the control cables were hanging down in the plane and we had no contact with the front of the plane, so we decided we were going to bail out. And he bailed out first. But I have to back up a minute. The radio operator went berserk, Sitters, and this is before I even, you know, so, anyway, it ended up that we had to throw him out, and he didn't make it. Then Wall bailed out. When I was ready to bail, there was also another door right back by the tail where Higgins and I were close friends and I just happened to look and his leg straps were hanging down. And I pointed to them, and he grabbed them and hooked them back up. If he had opened that chute, he would have gone right on through it. Anyway, quite interesting from this point as far as actually bailing out because we had no training whatsoever. And they always told us, there's no reason to practice something that has to be perfect the first time. It was that simple, because they didn't have anything to train us with.

I was wearing a chest pack, and I remember when we bailed out--I hadn't thought about it, but thinking you'd just fall straight down, well, you don't fall straight down. When you hit that prop wash, man, you swing up like this and you're spinning and turning, and these guys that parachute today, they know how to do it and they can control themselves and they're flying a lot slower than--when they bail out than we were flying. Anyway, when I started slowing down and I opened the parachute, man, what a surprise. Bang! Just like you hit that hard.

Mark: When it opens?

Van Selus: Yeah. Real jolt. Then everything is peaceful. You're away from the noise. And I actually saw our plane blow up. That's--that I'll always remember. What else was I going to say there? Oh, I remember coming down, I was circled by I think two German fighters, one anyway. They didn't try and shoot me. They could have very easily but they didn't. But I remember taking the oxygen mask off and just throwing

it away because--why that's important, I don't know, but it--it was. But then when I got down to low altitude, it was really windy on--on the ground, and I drifted for miles. I remember there was just like a water tower, only it was like a silo, and I was afraid I was going to hit it, but I--I missed that thing. I probably landed ten miles away from it.

But when I came into this field, it was surrounded by a hedge, and when I hit, the shroud lines were here in front of my face from the jet pack, and I went over backwards, hit the back of my head and that knocked me out and also hurt my back, but when I came to, I was at the other end of the field, and what had happened was it's a good thing I was wearing a chest pack because the parachute was dragging me along, the shroud lines are in front of my face like this, wearing a Mae West, and that inflated, so it actually protected me.

Mark: So there you are in enemy territory. Well, it's German, but it's--it's also France.

Van Selus: Well, it didn't make any difference. There were more Germans in France than there were Frenchmen.

Mark: Well, that's what I was wondering about, because, of course, France had an underground and that sort of thing, so when it came to getting--getting the heck out of there, tell us about that.

Van Selus: First of all, I was picked up by a couple of Germans. They searched me. But they--I think they let me go. I was in a truck and they stopped and they left, and so I just jumped out of the truck and kept the truck between me and where they were and just kept going. Even it does not seem like an important thing simply because I think that I was a nuisance and they were probably looking for guns that I was carrying. Didn't have one, I had eight compasses hid on me, and one was a big pocket watch and they got that. But they--an escape kit in my knee pocket, either they overlooked it, I don't remember.

Mark: These were just [unintelligible] Germans?

Van Selus: Yeah. Just--they weren't interested in me. It's as strange thing, but--but being a GI, I can understand where they probably had other ideas. But anyway—

Mark: So where in France was this precisely, do you know?

Van Selus: In the Beauvais area.

Mark: I'm not quite sure where that is.

Van Selus: Well, I can't tell you that offhand neither. It's not on the Normandy Peninsula.

Mark: It's in France—

Van Selus: We were on our way to—

Mark: --deep in France?

Van Selus: Yeah, deep in France. We were on our way to Frankfurt. But for me, this whole story starts, I had been--I was walking nights and hiding out in daytime, and the only intelligence they could tell us was if you're shot down, head south and try and cross France, cross the Pyrenees, get into Spain, you'll get thrown in jail, and Spain was neutral, supposedly, and the German consulate checked the jails every week, and no problem getting you out, and that is the way we were supposed to escape. There was no way that they could tell us to get in touch with the underground. If you're shot down in northern Germany, up on the North Sea, that was a different story. You look for boats that had laundry out, red, white, and blue.

That's--they're the people that would help you. Anyway, one morning, I was sitting in a hedge and there was a bank right below--right behind, it was higher than this ceiling, it was covered with brush, and I had this hedge spread out so that the sun was shining in on me--and by the way, you mentioned something a little while ago about here you are in France, and that's exactly the first thing that I thought about, I thought, here I am, now what in the hell do I do. The exact words of what I--I thought. Boy, I was--all of a sudden here I am in a strange country, I'm all by myself.

Mark: You didn't speak French, I assume.

Van Selus: No, no. Anyway, getting back to where I was, anyway, I looked--sitting in this hedge and looked up the hedge row, and here's a guy walking right down along the hedge row, so quietly I turned around and got on my hands and knees and went up through the brush and got up to the top, here is a guy no further than here to that thing there, and I surprised him as much as he surprised me, but I just put my hands up and surrendered.

Mark: He was a Frenchman, I assume?

Van Selus: Well, yes, turned out to be, but- [Unintelligible, both talking at once]

Mark: But you couldn't tell the loyalty.

Van Selus: So he put his hand up like this and leaned toward me, comrade, comrade. He got to me, he kissed me on both cheeks. And the people farmed--lived in the village and they farmed the land around it, so he and his son were going down in the woods to cut wood and they took me down there and--and the boy left, went back up in the village, came back again. Pretty soon a girl came and she had black bread with meat, it was either wild bore or rabbit meat, whatever, and wine. And, man, I was hungry and I had a feast. They couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak French,

but surprising how you can understand one another. The point was that I was supposed to sleep and then when the sun went down, they would come back out to get me. Well, I was tired and after I had all that to eat, finally I crawled in the brush and--and went to sleep. At night, they came back out and got me and took me up to their home.

There was a wooden fence all the way around it, and I'll tell you why that's important in a minute, but my back was so sore. I can remember this man rubbing my back with some kind of grease, which is probably wild bore grease or something like that, but it was warm. The other thing I remember, on this bed is one big pillow that--probably that high, covered the whole bed. I've never seen, never even heard of that before.

I was there for I think five days. I remember they had a French/English dictionary and I looked up toilet, and they took me to the back door, there was a whole backyard. Then one day a man came to see me, and he--he couldn't speak English neither, but he wanted my dog tags, so I gave them to him. We were always drilled that--that you never argue with the underground. You do what you're told. Well, to me, this guy was supposed to be the underground, but I realized when he left, man, that's a mistake. Now if I'm captured, I'm a spy. So I got the message to these people that I was with that I had to have those dog tags back. Well, they got one of them.

It turns out that--I didn't know it for some time after that, but everyone that helped you along the way got compensated by the American government. That's why everybody wanted a souvenir.

Mark: They wanted some proof?

Van Selus: Yeah. They had to have some proof. I've got to skip some of this stuff, but I'll hit all the highlights as we go along, as I remember them. This guy came in an old truck, and the man of the house and the daughter and the son and then the guy that came, he drove. Anyway, we went to this town, and the homes are built right up to the sidewalk, and I remember it was in the afternoon and we went into the house, and those people were scared to death. But I stayed there until dark. I'm not sure about that. It doesn't make any difference. Anyway, we left there, didn't stay there, but went across the street to a big, big frame house. This also had a fence all the way around it, but it was not a wooden fence. But everything was--was rushed. When we got there, they took me upstairs to a room on the second floor. And then explained to me French gendarme lived in the room right below me, collaborated with the Germans, so they hung a bell on the gate and every time anybody would go in and out, the bell would ring, and if it was this gendarme, if he was coming, then I had to lay on the bed and just stay there. If he was leaving, fine.

There was an old lady there, spoke broken English, and she would take me for a walk at night, and the streets were cobblestone and you could hear the Germans with

their boots and when we were meeting them, why, she'd grip my arm real tight and she'd be talking a blue streak. Of course, I didn't understand a word she was saying, but neither did the Germans, so--And, incidentally, one day they said, comrade, come, comrade, and sure enough, here one day my pilot camp Paralee--or Shemchick (??), and he could speak perfect French so he wasn't having a problem. They had him living right next door to a German officer. The—the reasoning behind that is the French felt the closer you are to your enemy, the safer you are, and that's why they did the things they did. They also said things like that Germany could not win the war because they had no sense of humor, the French did. The next place that I'll tell you about was—

[Pause on tape]

Mark: You left off with the cow shed.

Van Selus: Okay. In this cow shed, and every day the son, who is a teenager, would come out and get me in the evening and take me up to the house and have a real good meal, but every--the first thing--we had potato soup, I love potato soup, and, anyway, then one day in the afternoon, two guys came to see me. One was a great big bruiser, he had a mackinaw jacket on, and the other was a well-dressed man, derby hat, silk scarf, gloves, the whole works, and he could speak English, no problem. He talked about several different things, and then all of a sudden—he was probably standing from here to that corner or maybe even a little closer than that--all of a sudden he said, "Who plays with Bob Hope in the movies?" I knew then that I was being interrogated by the underground. I said, "Bing Crosby." He wanted to know how many bases on a baseball diamond, and I said three bases and home plate. He asked me a whole bunch of stupid questions like that, but they're things that every American would know but the Germans wouldn't know, and he eventually asked me about all my military, the crew, the home base, all that type of thing, and then even got to my family in Wisconsin, wanted to know all about that. And when he finished talking, he pulled his hands out of his pocket and he had a gun in each hand. That shook me up a little bit. But there was a reason for that as well. In fact, he explained to me that they couldn't take me with them because this was just too dangerous and someone would come and get me the next day. Well, the next day came and nobody came, so when I was up to the farmhouse that night, I--I was really concerned because now I'm wondering, I don't know if those were Germans or who they were, so I was going to start walking again, and these people had a fit, wanted me to stay one more day, so I agreed to do that.

The next day, this great big bruiser came, and I can remember because he was driving a car with the steering wheel on the wrong side and drove like a maniac, and we went into Beauvais, back into a church, went in the church, went up in the steeple, and here's this Jack who--well-dressed guy, and he said that this big bruiser wanted to apologize for not coming the day before.

What happened was he was from that--that town and the young people used to get together and have parties but the Germans put the kibosh on that, but he went to an apartment house to see a girl that lived on the second floor. When he knocked on the door, a man came to the door, invited him in, he said no, he just had a message for this girl. In talking to him, he recognized a slight German accent, so he hit the guy, knocked him back into the room, ran down the hall, when he grabbed the banister, the guy shot, and shot his little finger off.

If you read the story, it says thumb, but it wasn't [laughs]. Anyway, that's why he didn't come to get me. In this church steeple, they had a fake passport made up, and I was going to go to Paris on a train by myself. I was going to follow behind--several steps behind a guy to the train station. When we got to the train station, this is going to be the hairy part, because when you going in the train station and then you leave to go out to the train, at that door, that's where they check you papers. And--and they're gendarmes, but one of them's a German, and they cautioned me, boy, not to trust this--the gendarme, stay away from them. At one time early in war, they collaborated with the underground until the Germans found out about it. Then they put a German with each of the Frenchmen. My train of thought left me for a minute. Oh, so I--so I had my papers checked and went out and got on this train. And after dark, the train stopped, there was a lot of commotion, everybody got off the train, I followed the crowd, of course, walked up, and the tracks were all blown up.

The English mosquitoes had been there. They're--they did a lot of that. Anyway, so it was German soldiers, and they had their bayonet stuck into the ground and they went down this bank and, anyway, walked for a few miles up a train station, and it was dimly lit, but this crowd of people all standing around waiting for something, but there was one guy that was walking around, he had a mackinaw jacket on and a derby hat, and he always knew where I was, and I was trying to hide and, you know, 'cuz we were playing hide-and-seek. Later on, I'll tell you about why that's important.

Anyway, we got into Paris--they brought another train in, went into Paris. I was supposed to meet someone, I didn't know man, woman or who, but I was supposed to remove my beret and brush my hair twice and replace the beret. If someone did that, that is a signal that was the person I was supposed to meet. The problem was that it was after curfew and nobody allowed on the streets.

Here they have this huge train station filled with people and the gendarmes were walking around checking papers I was staying away from them until everybody started getting on a train, which I did, and laid down in the baggage rack and went to sleep. In the morning, went into this waiting room, I'm brushing my hair like crazy, and here's a young boy, I got the signal and we left. Got on the subway, rode for quite awhile, got off, walked several blocks, went into the court yard of a large apartment building and we walk six, seven stories and knocked on the door and this woman came, she had her house coat on, and he said something to her, oh, she was petrified. Anyway, went in, and what had happened was the night before, the

Germans raided the place where the underground was, and he was down waiting for me and so then he didn't know where to take me that next morning. This woman was a friend of his, and that's why he took me there. Her name was Margo, but I didn't stay there because she had a sick daughter, and they introduced me to her and it's "no fear, no fear," but on the bottle it said something about typhoid. No fear, yeah.

Anyway, then there was a woman that lived across the hall that was a friend of this woman, and that's where I stayed. Well, that day--this was the next day--this boy came back and he had this Jack with him, the well-dressed guy, and he was very perturbed because he didn't know these people, and he talked with me and found out that--he was satisfied, in other words. I remember this woman, Margo, because--no, not Margo, the lady where I was staying, in that apartment, because she worked in an aircraft parts factory and she had a map, she showed me exactly where this was. She wanted us to come over and bomb it, and she worked there, but they hated the Germans that--that much. What we did that week was Jack was coming every day and teaching me how to act like a Frenchman. He wouldn't tell me when we were going to leave or how or anything else.

When--when the day came, went down--several things happened this week, but I'm going to skip them because it will take too long to tell all of it--got down to the train station, I got married, and there was a big celebration to see us off on a honeymoon. A French girl, very pretty French girl. She was a regular member of the underground. We rode the train overnight to St. Bruce over on the Normandy Peninsula, and the place just crawling with Gestapo. If it hadn't been for her--the thing you have to remember is if they--anyone had spoken to me, we were dead, and her life would be in danger, not mine.

I'd be a prisoner of war, most likely. But, anyway, we changed trains there, got on a puddle jumper, had anti-aircraft guns on top of each car, and went up the coast or down the coast or where, I don't know where. Anyway, got off the train. When we went out the other door, they didn't check papers there, and just walked this path. Who's here? The guy in the mackinaw jacket.

He said, "Pick up the suitcase, follow the man on the bicycle." And the girl was still with me, and when got down around the bend, he caught up with us and said "this is as far as she goes," and she had tears in her eyes, she kissed me on both cheeks, and that was the last I saw of her.

So I continued following the man on the bicycle, and pretty soon, this guy caught up with me and we walked together, and--several miles, and came to a Catholic church and went in a wood shed underneath the school, the church part, and the priest brought me down some wine and bread with meat on it. And this guy told me, he said, make yourself comfortable, he said he had no idea how long we were going to be there, and he wouldn't tell me where we were going or anything. But he came back later that day--and there was an old car in there and I crawled in the car and

went to sleep--and he came back later that day and he offered me a Camel cigarette. I almost took his arm off. Man, I was--for all intents and purposes, I was home. But, anyway, we were sitting on stumps talking and--and he could--he could speak broken English.

All of a sudden he said, "Get your coat on, we're leaving." And we did. We walked not far, a couple of miles maybe, and pitch dark, and there was a crossroads and there was a store building there and a truck, and he said, get in the back end of that, and there's other people in there, and we drove and drove in as far as--into a woods area, and some confusion, but I went with two other Frenchmen, and I--by the way, they had given this Gladstone suitcase, this guy said, "guard it with your life," and I don't know if you know what a Gladstone suitcase is, they were very popular back at that time, probably the best luggage you could get. So I still had that. Then we split up and we came to--we were walking along the path and there was a board fence, they knew where the gate was, we went into this place.

There ended up there were 13 Americans altogether and we had potato soup. They said, "Eat as much as you can." They didn't know when we'd eat again. Then we split up again and crossed some streams up to our armpits, and I still had that suitcase and I remember carrying it over my head. You've seen pictures of the white cliffs of Dover. Very much the same way on the French side. And it was moonlight and so we descended that, and one of the Frenchmen took the suitcase. Anyway, got down and all wet and cold and laid in these rocks, and I had the suitcase back again then. Watched out over the water and saw just a flash. Pretty soon—it was an English PT boat, to make a long story short, and these sailors rode in and picked us up and took us out there and left real slow and then all of a sudden, they opened up and, man, we took off. Have no idea to this day what city we came to, because we went in--oh, they only use this escape route two weeks out of the year, two weeks or twice--anyway, because the moon had to be just right.

It had to be moonlight enough so you could see to descend this cliff but no--no moon when that PT boat was out there. So that was, you know, planning ahead. They knew what they were doing. Anyway, we got--pulled up the back side of this big ship and went aboard, and I remember the first thing they gave us was a half a glass of rum and had a shower and got English uniforms with the suspenders and the whole works, and I remember I got on a train, it was all shaded, nobody saw us, we didn't see anybody else neither. Got into London like the next morning or whenever it was.

Yeah, because we were on that ship all day and we left at night. And I remember getting into--to London because there was an English officer that met us and he only had one arm. But I was taken with a staff car--by a staff car to a secret address, secret telephone number, which is 66 Brook Street. There--the place was actually guarded, because they didn't know who I was. I could have been a German spy. Until they brought someone from our home base, my home base, to identify me. Texarden McClure (??)--still remember his name--came and identified me.

Incidentally, I had confidential papers and passport ready to bring along and I'll be darned if I didn't forget to bring it from Colorado. Sorry about that. But, anyway, I have all my medals and stuff. Well, that pretty much is the highlight of that story.

Mark: So once you got back to England, they didn't put you back on—

Van Selus: Couldn't stay in England more than 30 days.

Mark: What was the reason for that?

Van Selus: Because the Germans knew that I was down, and if shot down again, I'd be a spy because I brought information back.

Mark: So what happened to you then? Did you get discharged from the Air Force or did they send you back to the U.S. and you did stateside duty for a while?

Van Selus: I went back out to my home base. All my records--wait a minute. We left 66 Brook Street. Went out to Wide which is the United States Army Strategic Headquarters. And that's where Eisenhower, Doolittle, all those people were. I was there for two days. Interrogated again debriefed, got a new uniform, money, records brought up to date.

And I wish I had this paper along to show you. It's—I don't know if it's--no, it doesn't show it on here neither. [Papers shuffling] These were some of the medals, the distinguished flying cross, purple heart, air medal, and oak leaf cluster. That's what I looked like at that time. Things do change over years. What was I going to tell you about that? Anyway, uniform, money--oh, I just remembered. That--that paper had "confidential" in big red letters across the top of it. They told me to go out, do anything I wanted to do, but never to talk about this thing. If I got picked up by MPs for any reason, just show them the heading of this, "confidential," and it had United States Army Strategic Headquarters on it. That's all they had to see. So I was--felt pretty good about that, I'm a big shot [laughs].

Not really. But, anyway, then the first thing I did was go back out to my home base and saw Captain Moneymaker, who was the intelligence officer, and he was ecstatic because his work was really paying off. I was the first one ever to escape and--and get back. And at that time, I didn't know that I had won these things, except the purple heart, I had already gotten that from an earlier mission. But I couldn't stay in England more than 30 days, and so then when I left there, left London, I hitched a ride on a P-47 to Prestwood, Scotland. After midnight, we left on a DC-3--or DC-6, flew to Iceland, Newfoundland. That's the first place I spent American money again. But the big change was when we flew in over New York City at night, all lit up, and here's London, which is a blackout. What a--a world away.

I went home on furlough. Then from there, I was—my orders read--actually, what they did, I was supposed to go to Atlantic City, the Ambassador Hotel, which is the hospital, but I was also entitled to a furlough. So I was attached--any time you go anywhere, you're attached to something. I was attached to the air transport command, just to fly back to the States. They cut orders that read that I was to proceed to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, with a 23-day delay en route. That way the Air Force paid for my trip home. So I actually had to go to Fort Sheridan and then--it was on a Sunday and I went to a movie, and I was going to surprise my parents because they--they had gotten a telegram, of course, that I was missing in action, but that's all they knew, and so I was going to surprise them, but at the air base--or at the theater, I ran into a guy from my hometown that knew me and he was surprised. So, well, that kind of blew that story. So I called home. My half brother and sister were the only ones home, and they were young.

When my folks got home, my father and stepmother, why, they said that I had called and I was at some fort but they didn't know where [laughs]. Well, my dad knew right away, so he drove to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and that Monday morning I was getting new orders cut and this captain said, "I better tell you, your father's been down at the main gate since 6:00 this morning," so he said his jeep was down around front and he said, "go down and get him and take him to NCO club for lunch," and I did, and then we went home. And that--that was a bad time because everybody wanted to be so nice and, you know, I couldn't pick up a glass of water with one hand without spilling, my nerves were just shot. But I--I talked to schools and the Kiwanis Club and places like that. But after I was there, home 20 days, I left. I just wanted to be by myself and--anyway, then I went to Atlantic City. I was there for two weeks. They sent me to a hospital in St. Petersburg, Florida, for six weeks.

Mark: And what did you do there? It was just [both talking at once]

Van Selus: Convalescent hospital.

Mark: Yeah. I mean, were you seen by doctors, or was it just a chance for you to—

Van Selus: Doctors, doctors. But the first thing they told you--they had all kinds of entertainment, deep sea fishing, you name it--they didn't want you to worry about anything. If you wanted to take a nap, go and take a nap, who cares. That was the attitude of the whole thing. When you wanted to talk to the doctors, there to talk to, psychiatrists and whoever. But I finally got so sick and tired of that place that I asked to be shipped out. And that's exactly what they wanted. So they sent me to the good hotel in Miami Beach (laughs) for two weeks, and then from there--oh, now I'll go back and tell you something. Any time you ship out, you have to get a medical clearance. And I was leaving Miami. I was going to Laredo, Texas. I had the choice of places to go, but I--I picked that one because it was an instructors' school, and then I could be reassigned and I'd have some choices. But at the hospital, I was walking down the hall, I had just gotten my clearance, and the ward boy called me back. Went back in, here's Scanlin, the guy that was shot up.

[END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1 OF 2]

Van Selus: They wired up his jaw. He's pale and thin, same old Scanlin though, tougher than nails, and he was getting a discharge. Man, that just made my day right there great. You want to know the rest of—

Mark: After you were discharged, is that what you—

Van Selus: No, I wasn't discharged, he was.

Mark: Oh, he was discharged?

Van Selus: He was discharged. He was getting a medical discharge there.

Mark: Yeah.

Van Selus: No, I went on to Laredo, went through instructors' school and the night that we graduated, there were 360-some men, and they wanted five--or fifteen volunteers--no, wait a minute--five volunteers, had a whole list of things that you had to meet, ex-combat and all this kind of thing.

Turned out there were only five of us that could qualify for this. And they said, well, in that case, we would be drafted to go, but they would guarantee us we would not leave the States. Then there were ten other GIs that were not ex-combat and things, and then a corporal and a second lieutenant from research. And we went to Smoky Hill Army Air Base in Inna, Kansas, for two weeks. The first time I had ever saw a B-29. Man, I fell in love with that thing. And we flew--no, no. We just went to school there.

Then from there, we all went to Bedford Army Air Base in Bedford, Massachusetts, and on a Monday morning, we went up to MIT. And they read off five names, and I was one of them. The five of us were going to go to school there. And General Electric & Westinghouse had built the radar equipment for the tail of the B-29 but the Air Force wouldn't buy it because it was too complicated. They didn't know what kind of men it took to operate it.

And so that's--all this time, they're eliminating people down to us five. And so we went to school there for almost three months, and then they flew us from there down to Eglin Field, Florida, which is secret testing ground, proving ground, and we flew in this B-29 almost every day. I shot down 20 OQ and PQ fighters with it, which was remote-controlled aircraft. Man, this thing was great. And so I volunteered to go to the Pacific three times and they wouldn't let me go, because I wanted to fly in one of those. Boy, if you want to find out how dumb you are, go to MIT. You'll find out in a hurry. But that was an excellent experience.

Mark: Now, somewhere in here, [unintelligible] or had you been discharged by the time the war was officially over?

Van Selus: I was discharged October 25th.

Mark: Of '45?

Van Selus: Of '45, yeah. Just a couple of weeks short of the years. But--oh, but when I finished instructors' school after Laredo--or Eglin Field, Florida, I went home for a little and then went back to Laredo and finished my last year in the service, which is wonderful. If you've ever been to Laredo, Texas, I remember getting off the train when I first got there and walking out, almost went AWOL, what a dump.

But, anyway, they didn't know what to do with me. There weren't any ex-combat men back at that time, and so I was in this permanent party barracks and got to be friends with some of these guys that worked up in time section of post operations--or just post operations, and every night we'd go up there and play cards, and met the assistant operations officer, Captain Fields, and one day he said, "Why don't you come and work for us." I said, "Doing what?" He said, "In time section." He said, "Sergeant Madrid is the only GI there, along with all these girls," and he said, "he can never go anywhere because there's nobody to be there. All you have to do is answer the phone." Okay, that sounds--sounds good. So I was assigned to them. A week later, they shipped Madrid out and they said, "Now you're chief corporal, time section, post operations." My God, I read regulations. And the good part about it is I found a regulation that said that you're not automatically taken off flying status upon arrival back in the States. And I took that in and showed it to Captain Mackness (?). He said, well, find yourself a pilot and go out and fly. I had to have 12 hours to collect three months' back pay. And he said, "don't--don't tell anybody" (laughs). So I did and filled out a form 5 and went down and collected my money and they had a fit down in finance. And they said, "Don't let anybody else know about this."

Anyway, that year was wonderful because I was on flying status, making good money, and just every weekend go out and fly with Captain Fields, and we'd go out and buzz cattle and bounce the things off clouds and just--we had a good time. When I was ready to go home on furlough, all I had to do was find a pilot and have him fly me home to Wisconsin. Actually, somewhere in Illinois, but—

Mark: Not bad for the military.

Van Selus: That's right. And all in all, now today, my military career was the highlight of my life. Secondary only to getting married to my wife.

Mark: If you've got the time, I've got just a couple of questions about post war years.

Van Selus: Sure.

- Mark: For example, we talked about going to UW after World War II, and you mentioned how the campus was filled with vets. Why don't you just tell me a little bit about campus here after World War II and your experiences.
- Van Selus: Okay. Enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, and Jim Undercoffer (??) and I were roommates at a private house where several other guys stayed. I don't even remember the address now. But, anyway, after—
- Mark: What did you study?
- Van Selus: Pardon?
- Mark: What did you study?
- Van Selus: Just--I was in business administration. Who knew at that time what you wanted to be. But then it becomes a personal thing, because one day my father came down to see me and said that he and my stepmother were getting a divorce, and he had a business of--a funeral supply business that he had been in for several years and he said, "You're my only son." He said he would like to have me take it over. Man, I don't know anything about selling anything. I don't have any money. He said, "That's all right, those things will be taken care of." So I left the University and I moved to Pardeeville, and the first thing that I ever learned to sell was folding chairs. Got a franchise from Betwood Products Company, Louisville, Kentucky, and I sold several carloads. Right after the war everybody needed something and chairs were--funeral homes, churches, you name it, so--and then gradually worked into the funeral supply business, caskets and steel vaults and all that type of thing, and he got his divorce, and I thought eventually he'd take it back over again, but he didn't. He left. He married a girl from up in Denmark, Wisconsin, and he moved up there. Here I am with a business that I don't like. Worked hard and finally had enough, and I just sold out the merchandise and put everything that I owned in my car and I headed west.
- Mark: This was how long after the war, just out of curiosity?
- Van Selus: Seven years. Anyway, then I went to Casper, Wyoming. I had an aunt and uncle that had a ranch out there and had spent a couple of weeks with them and then moved into the town of Casper. Eventually went to work for Northwest Schools, which is technical training. Traveled for them for several years. We got married in Casper, she came out from Wisconsin, and we lived in Salt Lake City and then moved to Denver. And then I was personnel director for Patricia Stevens Career College for several years, and that was--that was good. I did a lot of traveling, but--then got into the industrial chemical business and was in that for--I traveled for ten years for Certified Laboratories out of Irving, Texas, and then I started my own chemical business, and had that for several years.

And then my uncle had a patent on a--on a particular hoist for hauling long farm machinery. And when I found out about it, why, I made a deal with him, and so I started manufacturing them, but they were--all I had to do was--they were not what he had. I used the hoist part but--they were hydraulic and they were--I could haul pieces of equipment 32 feet long up to four, five tons, and that was great, until my partner died. We were manufacturing them over in Grand Junction, Colorado, but I was living in Littleton, Colorado. So, anyway, that pretty much took care of that business. And then I went into the communication business with American Cable, and eventually to United Artists, and that's when I retired. So now we're pretty much enjoying life. We will have been married 40 years next month.

Mark: I got--there are two more things I'd like to discuss briefly. One involves the various benefit programs available to veterans after World War II. You went to college. Did you use the GI Bill, for example, perhaps the most famous World War II program?

Van Selus: Right. And we got \$65 a month.

Mark: Did you find it was covering your expenses?

Van Selus: Um-hum. At that time, nobody else had any money neither so--yep. I don't know if you know--I just happened to remember--did you ever hear of a guy by the name of John Petris?

Mark: I don't think so.

Van Selus: State legislator. He lived with us. Real nice. Kenny Brenner from Richland Center--or Reedsburg, also.

Mark: Now, in terms of medical benefits, you have a purple heart, those sorts of things. Did you have--first of all, maybe I should state this, after you got discharged, did you have any medical problems from the service?

Van Selus: No. I had a problem with my back for several years, but eventually that healed up. I, also, from freezing--when the feet were frozen, it destroyed the sweat glands and I developed blisters, and when I was still in the service, they'd paint my feet with purple stuff, so you couldn't go swimming or anything because I had purple feet. But I really never attempted to make use of any medical facilities.

Mark: All right.

Van Selus: I have no complaints about the military whatsoever.

Mark: You sort of alluded to sort of the psychological toll of being in combat. Did that sort of thing affect you after, even if you didn't seek any treatment or anything?

Van Selus: Funny, my sister-in-law asked me that question yesterday, and I got to thinking about it last night. I would have nightmares sometimes.

Mark: Right after the war?

Van Selus: Yeah.

Mark: For about how long? Couple months? Couple years?

Mrs. Van Selus: Oh, I don't know, even after we were married, there would be times. When He'd cry out in the night, and I'd wonder if it was associated with that.

Van Selus: And it was. Just calm me down, it was all over. But nothing that affected my mentality or anything.

Mark: Nothing that affected making a living?

Van Selus: No.

Mark: Anything you sought treatment for?

Van Selus: No.

Mark: I've just got one last area I want to cover--I'm not even sure it applies to you or not--and that involves veterans' organizations and meetings and that sort of thing. Let's start, right after the war, did you join any groups, any big ones, like the Legion? VFW?

Van Selus: Yeah, joined the American Legion in Pardeeville.

Mark: For what reason?

Van Selus: Because everybody else did, I guess. I just wanted to feel part of--once you're in the military like that you're never going to lose that. I have a lot of respect for the military, especially the Air Force of course, and so much of my life was actually based on the Air Force. There are certain people that I resent that wouldn't serve their country, but I won't mention them by name.

Mark: I understand that. What was I going to ask? Oh, were you an active member of the Legion Post up there? I mean, did you attend meetings and hold offices, or was it just more of a social thing for you?

Van Selus: No, because that's when I left. It was only a matter of probably a year or something like that before I left. I also became a member of the Masonic Lodge. My father was a Shriner and that type of thing. But when I started traveling, those things were all pretty much ruled out because I traveled for almost 40 years.

Mark: After you retired, had perhaps a little more leisure time, did you—did you rekindle those connections? Have you attended any reunions, that sort of thing, get active in these groups again?

Van Selus: It's interesting, because a very close friend of mine who's originally from Milwaukee, had just joined the VFW, and I'm going to join.

Mark: You're going to join?

Van Selus: Um-hum.

Mark: You're--you're a future member of the VFW?

Van Selus: Right, yeah.

Mark: For what reason?

Van Selus: Now because I have time. Before, traveling all the time and raising a family. We have four children, three girl and a boy. They're all adults now, of course.

Mark: Yeah. Now, why the VFW? I mean, there are several other groups. Is it just the connection with your friend or Is there something more about that?

Van Selus: Probably join the Legion again, too. But there's just something about being a foreign war veteran. Just like I have a very, very close friend who was at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, we're very close, and he's very active in that and, I don't know, the more of a closer knit with someone who has actually been in combat

Mark: Yeah.

Van Selus: A lot of guys have been in the service, but it isn't everyone that has actually been in actual combat.

Mark: Um-hum

Van Selus: And that's different. I wouldn't give any amount of money for experience that I had in flying combat missions. It was a whole new world.

Mark: Something you wouldn't give up, but something you wouldn't want to relive?

Van Selus: I wouldn't want to relive it, but I'm--thank goodness that I went through it, and I'm very proud of it.

Mark: Those are all of the questions I had. Is there anything else you'd like to add or go back to?

Van Selus: Can you think of any?

Mrs. Van Selus: [Unintelligible.]

Van Selus: I've pretty much covered the highlights of this story. Sure. Man, we could be here for another four hours. But it's amazing when you stop and think, that is over 50 years ago. You're not even that old yet.

Mark: No. Not--not nearly 50.

Mrs. Van Selus: Far cry.

Van Selus: I don't think I was ever your age either. That was so many years ago.

Mark: Went from 18 to 40 right away?

Van Selus: Right away, yeah!

Mark: Well, thanks for coming in.

Van Selus: Enjoyed it.

[End of interview.]