

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Bob Wetter, United States Army Air Corps
World War II

2003

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Robert Wetter, (1925-), Oral History Interview, 2003.

User copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Robert Wetter, a Milwaukee, Wis. native, discusses his experiences in the United States Army Air Corps as a CFC gunner (Central Fire Control) on a B-29 with the 500th Bomb Group, 883rd Squadron. He recounts a story of his enlistment, describes his basic training in Biloxi (Mississippi), officer training at the University of Cumberland (Tennessee), and pilot training at Maxwell Field (Alabama). He relates buzzing a barge, and is sent to armament school at Fort Logan (Colorado) and gunnery training at Elgin Air Force Base (Florida). He describes night vision testing conducted in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was also assigned to Kirkland Air Force Base (New Mexico), and he describes an engine explosion and emergency landing. Wetter explains the responsibilities of the CFC gunner and other gunners, and the layout, flying experience, and crew in a B-29. He describes landing a B-29 on a very small island. Wetter states he was stationed on Saipan, and talks about his first mission to fire bomb Toyama (Japan). He describes missions to deliver supplies to prisoner of war camps. Wetter expresses his opinion on the dropping of the atomic bomb and recounts a trip back to the Pacific in 1995. He also tells a humorous story about buzzing an aircraft carrier in the Pacific with a B-29. He talks about the air force's physical tests that demonstrated the effects of anoxia (lack of oxygen) on the airmen. Wetter touches upon his brief involvement with the 52-20 Club and the Purtell Shue Legion Post. He describes using the GI Bill for his education. Wetter mentions that he is a member of the VFW. He also comments on a reunion held in Denver (Colorado) for the 73rd Bomb Wing. He expresses his feeling on serving in the military, and relates a story about military camp life in the U.S.

Biographical Sketch

Wetter (b. January 20, 1925) enlisted in the Air Force at age eighteen and served as a CFC gunner on a B-29 in the Pacific. After the war, he settled in Milwaukee, Wis.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcript edited by Rachel Reynard, 2004.

Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And today is August 21, 2003. And this is an oral history interview with Bob Wetter. Bob is a veteran of World War II, U. S. Army Air Corps. And, Bob, thanks for agreeing to the interview and for coming over.

Wetter: Well, you are welcome.

John: Okay. Would you start off with where were you born, when, and take it from there?

Wetter: Well, I was born on January 20, 1925. In the city of Milwaukee. I lived there all of my life except for two interruptions. And went to grade school, went to high school, and during high school, the attack on Pearl Harbor took place. I was sixteen years old.

John: Do you remember what you were doing?

Wetter: I was delivering newspapers that Sunday morning and did not know about the attack until I got home. And my father must have turned on the radio. That was all the news there was that day.

John: I believe it.

Wetter: And that is what I was doing on that particular day. And I was only sixteen years old. The next January I would have been seventeen. And so at the end of the next year, I was eighteen years old, in 1943. Eighteen years old. And went down to the Navy recruiting area and enlisted in the Navy.

John: In the Navy?

Wetter: On my eighteenth birthday.

John: Okay.

Wetter: Another fellow and I. A buddy of mine. We both went down, and I must have asked, when will we hear from them? "Oh, two or three weeks." Well, two or three weeks went by. A month went by. And I inquired again. "Just sit tight. They will get to you." Well, in March, I joined the Air Force. The Air Corps, the U. S. Army Air Corps. And it didn't take them long. In seven days, I was gone. So, I really enlisted but I had a draft number. And when I got to the, I had to report to the Draft Board that I had enlisted. When I went into their office, here I see a friend from grade school. And he was very distraught, unhappy. "I just got drafted!" And I said, "Oh?" And he said, "I don't want to. This is not the time for

me to get drafted.” So I said, “Well,” whoever I talked to at the counter, I said, “I’m enlisting. Can I enlist and get his number? And get him for the next call up, whenever his next call was?” And they said, “Yes.” So I got a draft number but I really enlisted.

John: That was a good thing to do.

Wetter: And he was very thankful.

John: I am sure he was.

Wetter: And he did get into service later. But, anyhow, so I enlisted and seven days later I was on my way to Biloxi, Mississippi, for basic training. And was there a day and a half and my name was with about fifty other names. Some were there two, three weeks. We were supposed to have thirty days of basic training. My name was called and after a day and a half of basic training, I was gone. They sent me to college for five months, in Lebanon, Tennessee, the University of, Cumberland University, Lebanon, Tennessee. And for you young people, this won’t mean anything to you, but Cordell Hull, our Senator from Wisconsin who was a Senator for at least twenty-four years at that time, was very well know. He graduated from that college.

John: Was he from Wisconsin, or from Tennessee?

Wetter: Yes. He was from Tennessee. And so the college is still in operation today. Soon after I spent my five months in...

John: Taking what?

Wetter: Oh, courses for, to bring us up to an officers’ status.

John: Okay.

Wetter: Usually they were conducting people as officers if they had a college education. So they were trying to bring up our education level to that. So, after that, well, we took mathematics, geography, history. We actually did some flying, ten hours of flying, just to introduce us, because we were Air Cadets training to be pilots. Well, anyhow, went through that, went through classification, took some tests and scored equally in navigation, bombardiering and pilot training, so I could choose. I chose pilot training, and from there I went to Maxwell Field, Alabama, for pre-flight. A nice base.

John: Let me back up just a bit. When you enlisted, did you enlist for flight training?

Wetter: Yes.

John: Or did you just end up there?

Wetter: No. I enlisted for that particular program. And as an enlistee - this is a little backing up here - the basic soldier was paid \$50 a month at that time. It was raised from \$21 to \$50 sometime a little bit earlier. But a cadet was paid \$75. And, well, anyhow, that was nice. So after pre-flight at Maxwell Field, that ended up to be twelve weeks, went on to primary flying school. And we flew Fairchild PT - PT stands for Primary Trainer - 19's, no, 23's. Radial engine, open cockpit. Single wing. And we flew those about three or four hours and they brought in the PT-17, a Stearman, bi-wing. The Barons fly those, the pizza people.

John: Oh, okay.

Wetter: They fly Stearmans. Very maneuverable, terrific airplane. I liked it very much. And from there I went to basic, PT-13's, called, we called them, made by Vultee, but we called them the Vultee Vibrator. Whenever you put them in a stall, those things, you thought the wings were going to come off and the plane was going to fall apart. But they didn't. So, in basic training, I was doing very well scholastically, but I did some stupid thing, really. There is no buzzing in airplanes. Well, in primary school, I was buzzing trains, anything that moved. And in the BT's I did the same thing but here we were stationed in Newport, Arkansas, near the Mississippi River. And we had a training area that went, you flew to practice what you were taught earlier. And the instructor, of course, you had soloed and the instructor wasn't with you, so you were flying solo. Well, I happened to see a barge on the Mississippi River and buzzed that. And they had warned us earlier. You know, we had an AT-6, which was faster. And we would fly, they would fly surveillance over your practice area, there were four different practice areas.

John: Okay.

Wetter: And they happened to hit mine at the wrong time. Well, needless to say, that was the end of my flying career. But I did learn how to fly lighter planes.

John: Okay.

Wetter: So, from there, I had a choice of coming back to Madison, Wisconsin, to go to radio school. They had a radio school here. Thirty-six weeks. And I said, "Well, I can go back home." I didn't join to go back home. Okay, they said, "How about armament school?" I said, "Where is it?" They said, "Denver, Colorado." I said, "I'll go." So I went to armament school. And there learned the basics of a gun, how they operate, the history, kind of the history, how to take them apart, put them together. And from there I went to Fort Myers, Florida, for gunnery training. And that consisted of skeet houses, which is, shooting trap is one house, shooting skeet is two houses, a high house and a low house. And two clay pigeons came

out at one time from each house, and you are supposed to hit them both. And after some practice, I became very skilled. And after that training in Fort Myers, Florida, which by the way, I was in Denver for about six months. March, April, May, June, July, August, September and at the end of September, they sent us to Fort Myers. I was there for the winter.

John: That's good.

Wetter: And I keep telling everybody. "Oh, yea, I just wrote my Congressman, I said, enough of this cold weather." Which is far from the truth. So, from there I got leave to come home, what they call a delay in route. Because from Florida I was going to go to Lincoln, Nebraska. In February. And it was very cold by the time I got to Lincoln, Nebraska. So that was quite a sudden change. And one particular story that I like to tell about being stationed in Lincoln, they did a few tests on people. And you also at that point were assigned to a crew for your next base, which would be your loose ends of each people melding together into a crew. But, to back up a little about this area, I thought it was kind of funny but it really scared me. One morning at eight o'clock I was to report to a, for an eye test. And the night before it turned very cold after it snowed about ten inches. And I had to walk about a mile and a half from where our barracks was to this testing area, against the sun. Nice blue morning, clear, cold. The sun reflecting off the snow. I got to this building, opened the door, and I just stopped. The minute the door closed, I stopped. I said, "Where are you?" They had one little bulb in this office area, and everything was painted black. So, another G. I. came in behind me, opened the door, "Oh, there is the desk." So I walked up to the desk and told them who I was, and "Okay, go through those two doors." Well, the door closed, and I couldn't see the doors. So another person came in so I went in the next room and there they had another, it seemed like a one watt bulb. I could see it, but nothing else. I had to wait for somebody to open that door so I could, oh, there is seats. I found out later it was like a theater. They were sloped, and the test was like night vision. So the test was performed, imagine a donut that has eight sections, but one section is cut out. And you had a knob, and there were probably twenty-four, twenty-five of us in there. And the instructor says, "Okay, I am going to demonstrate on the board here. Let's pay attention." He must have turned something on, everybody else could see it and get it. He said, "Okay, now, I am going to put this donut on the board and you are going to see that cut-out at nine o'clock. I want you to take your little donut on your donuts on your desk in front of you and match it. And when I say 'done,' that means we recorded all the positions of each station." "Do you have it on?" He thought I was being wise, but I couldn't see. So, he says, "Come on down here." I says, "Well, are there stairs?" I could not see. So he says, "Just come out to the aisle, slow. And just keep touching the chairs as you come down." I must have been four or five, six feet away from him, and I said, "Oh, I understand. Thank you. Now, how do I get back to my seat?" So somebody took me back to my area, sat down, and he went through twenty-five positions. And when the scores, when it was done, they gave

each individual his score. Well, I got two out of twenty-five. And that was just luck. Like a slot machine. So that really worried me. When we were on night flying training, or missions, especially training, I'd ask the other gunners in our group, "Can you see those lights out there? That's Tucson." "Yea." I says, "Can you see anything further than that?" "No." So, anyhow, I just was worried that I didn't have night vision and they'd toss me off the program. But, anyhow, I learned five years later when I was reading this article in the Readers Digest, an article about night vision. And they said some people take longer to adjust to night vision. I must have been one of them.

John: Yea. I'll be darned.

Wetter: But, anyhow, so I was really at ease five years later. So we got to, we were assigned, we were transferred to Kirkland Air Force Base, Albuquerque, New Mexico. And we went there by train from Lincoln, Nebraska to Albuquerque, or Kirkland Field. A nice base. We were the first crew there that trained. So everybody was really looking forward to us. There was no bad image, yet. And the training went very well. At one point in time, the Army would give you physicals, examine your teeth and dentist said, "Well, we're going to have to make an appointment or two for you. You are going to have to come back." So I came back to get a couple of fillings, and he said, "Well, we are going to make you a partial." And they made me a partial. And, about a week later, we were flying some night training. I think from Kirkland to San Diego and back, and on the way back, it was dark. And we were flying at 26,000 feet. And number two engine exploded. I was not sitting in my top gunnery position. I was sitting at a side blister because every guy was sleeping. And I was reading, now, you have to remember, I was nineteen years old. I was reading a comic book. And number two engine exploded, bang! And the flames shot past my blister window where I was sitting, and beyond the tail. A short burst, and then it kind of retracted and just burned. And a B-29 at that time had fire extinguishers in the engines cowling area. And the pilot rang the prepare-to-bail-out bell, so everybody woke up and got ready. But we had not depressurized the cabin yet. It would be awful cold up there. So he tried the extinguishers, and I said, "John, they are out." "Aw, good." "John, they are back on!" He goes, "Well, we got one more try." And he tried it and it did extinguish the fire. So we radioed to the nearest base that we'd like to make an emergency landing. Little did I know at the time the engine exploded I bit down so hard, I had pieces in my mouth. I spit it in my hand, put them in a pocket. And that was my partial they made. So, of course, we get back and I go to the dentist and take this out and pour it out from my hand on the tray, and he says, "How did you do that?" I says, "I guess I must have bit too hard." He says, "That's impossible. Were you in a fight?" I says, "No." "What caused you to bite so hard?" I says, "Well, when the engine exploded." He says, "Oh, you were the guys?" They made me another one.

John: Wow.

- Wetter: But anyhow, after Kirkland, we went overseas.
- John: Now, you were a top turret gunner?
- Wetter: Top. Called a Central Fire Control, CFC gunner. And I was in charge of the four gunnery positions, the tail gunner, the right blister, the left blister. I was the top turret and the bombardier could at times be like the nose gunner. So I would assign the guns. I could assign, there were two guns on the lower side, the tail gunner the rear aft and the front forward lower guns, and there were two on top. The front top, and the aft top. And I could control my two guns at the same time, or I could control one and the bombardier the other. But I would disseminate the information and the side blister gunners, if somebody was attacking from three o'clock, he could have the gun. The minute it started to pass under, I could pass it to the left gunner and he could pick it up as the airplane...
- John: Did you do this by voice?
- Wetter: No, by switches.
- John: Okay. I see. Okay.
- Wetter: By the way, those guns, I am getting a little ahead of myself. Those guns were, we were not sitting in a turret with the guns. Like a B-17, or a B-25.
- John: Oh, I see.
- Wetter: We were divorced from our guns except the tail gunner. But the two guns that I controlled, the top two, one was about three and a half feet from me towards the tail, and the other was about forty-four feet to the nose. And I could control those two turrets at one time tracking the same target. And they would each pick their own lead or lag or whatever for an attacking aircraft.
- John: Okay.
- Wetter: And it was controlled by a computer.
- John: Okay.
- Wetter: A very rudimentary type computer made of relays and vacuum tubes. Solid state was not even thought of yet. I guess. But it worked very efficiently and it was a terrific system. And now that I mentioned the B-29, it was like the B-17 or B-24, those gunners flying at higher altitude, it was forty-five or sixty below zero. They were in these winter flying suits. Some even had electrical heating in them. And they were still cold. The B-29, I hate to tell you this, these old guys. I flew in a

summer flying suit, no t-shirt, no gloves, no nothing. We were temperature controlled, pressurized like an airliner today, and actually in perfect comfort. We even could take sandwiches. We even had a potty aboard. So, we were flying first class. But the B-29 was faster, could carry more and much further. The maximum range would probably be, with bombs, thirty-eight hundred or four thousand miles.

John: Oh, wow. Loaded?

Wetter: Loaded. And just to get from our base in the Marianas, which would have to be Saipan, where I was, was a round trip of minimum thirty-two hundred miles. So if you went up from Rykyushu (?) to Hokkaido Island, it would be thirty-four, thirty-six hundred round trip. So, that was a long ranging, and it was made for that theater of war. Because, after Iwo, there was nothing closer for us to use as a base, other than Okinawa. But, of course, everything was stepping-stones through the Pacific. And the closer they got, the more bombs we could carry, and so on.

John: What was a bomb load, say, out of Saipan?

Wetter: Twenty thousand pounds. Ten tons.

John: Man.

Wetter: That was a lot. I think the B-17 and the B-24, I think they could carry four thousand, but they were from England to Europe, that was a short haul. But, yes, they had improved the airplanes an awful lot. And it was a nice airplane. The engines weren't very reliable, at first. They never tested the airplane. They'd test it by saying, "Here it is."

John: Wow.

Wetter: So there were a lot of problems in the early days. Let's see, where was I? We were flying overseas and went from Sacramento to Hawaii. Stayed overnight.

John: How big was your crew?

Wetter: Eleven. There was a, we didn't call the pilot the pilot. He was called the commander, aircraft commander. And then a pilot was actually the co-pilot. So it was airplane commander, the pilot, and of course the bombardier, navigator, flight officer, radioman, CFC, left gunner, right gunner and the tail gunner. And I don't think I missed anyone. Radarman. He was in back with us, in the aft part of the aircraft between the last bomb bay. We had two bomb bay, the front and the rear. And our compartment was after the rear, but not all the way to the tail. We were just part of that. And the tail gunner, before we would take off, he would have to get into his compartment and seal it. And, of course, he would be pressurized in

his own little tail gunner compartment. So he was very isolated. I guess they had to have a certain mental condition to handle that. During our training at Kirkland, a tail gunner that was originally assigned, I don't think he could handle it because all of a sudden he happened to have like a rash on his feet. And he'd go to the hospital and he'd be in there for a week. He'd come out. It would be regressing. Get in the airplane and it would start to progress again. So, they took him off our crew and we got another tail gunner, and he could handle it. Then we had a right blister gunner, another one, that, man, he was a great guy, terrific. But we'd get, I'm going to exaggerate, we'd get one inch off the runway and he'd need the bag. And he'd need that bag until we touched the runway. So, he didn't last long, either. Whatever it was, just it affected him that way. But, the rest of us, I guess we took it in stride. One of those little things a person runs into. And, let's see, we got to Hawaii. Stayed overnight. In Honolulu. And from there, the next stop was Kwajalein. A very small island in a lot of water. That is where navigation came in.

John: I'll bet. Yea.

Wetter: And the navigator hit it right on. And the tower said, "No, you are going to have to fly around." No other airplanes around. "You're going to have to fly around the island and watch the surf. This runway is so short that you must watch the surf coming up this end of the runway, because it might take away one hundred, two hundred feet." Okay, now we are going to gauge it. "Okay, make an approach. Oops, go around. Missed it." So, anyhow, we did time it and we did land, and we stayed overnight. Refueled, and stayed overnight. And the next morning, he says, "Okay, now we're going to do this in reverse." Now we got to watch the other end of the runway. And there was one B-29 that must have hit the surf on take-off, and of course, it stops you, just stops your speed so fast that they actually went into the water there probably eight or ten feet. But we made it, and the next stop was Guam. That was sort of like the anchor of the Marianas. We landed there and we found out that we were going to Saipan. Which, at the time, I didn't know was about a hundred and thirty-five miles north of Guam. And we transferred to a Commando, a C-46 with bucket seats. But, we made it, and landed at Saipan. Probably around noon. We got out and the first place they took us was to the squadron, and we met the squadron commander. His name happened to be Vince Black. He was a major, very nice. And I didn't mention that when we did fly over, we flew over with another crew.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

They didn't have enough B-29's for each crew, so our airplane commanders drew straws and our commander drew the short straw, which means we didn't fly. And I'd like to point out that our bombardier was a bombardier instructor in the States for twenty-eight months and he could navigate. Great as a navigator. Our navigator was a recent trainee navigator and he was very good. We never missed a spot during training, where some navigators did. And, because I had flown earlier,

I had very rudiment navigation training and flight training. So those were the three. And another well-trained crew member was our radio man. He taught radio at Madison, I believe, for two years. He could take radio in his sleep. And I am going to exaggerate again, but this guy here could send at twenty words a minute with his left hand and send sixteen words with his right hand, and get both messages. This guy was, you'd think he was almost asleep, and he'd start writing out the message. Very good. So we had two very well-trained people in our crew. So, well, anyhow, our half got over there a day ahead of the second half, and when we got off our airplane, we met this Major Black, and he said, "Well, you guys are here. Well, you'll go through one week of ground school training here and I'm not asking you to forget anything they taught you in the States. It's all good stuff. But these guys flew thirty-five missions. They know what they are talking about. They got the actual, the real time experience." He says, "Now, when the rest of your crew gets here tomorrow, you'll start two days later at your ground school." Well, that was maybe about one o'clock or so. So we get assigned our places and go in our barracks and pretty soon, at about four o'clock, the loudspeakers go on, "Okay, well, all air crews report to the ready room." The enlisted men went one place and the officers went to the other place. And they said, "In addition, Lieutenant John Hunter," our airplane commander, "report to the ready room. George Knowles," the bombardier, "report to the ready room." You are going to like this next name. "David Orick," of Orick vacuum cleaner, but he wasn't selling them then. "Report. Ray Witt," and myself. And we go, "Oh, they are probably going to introduce us to what goes on here." So we went there and I hear this presentation, and I can only speak for the enlisted men, because that was the meeting I was, at the briefing. And they said, "Sergeant Witt, you are going to fly with the group leader, the colonel, as his radioman." [Pause.] "And Sergeant Wetter, you are going to fly with me." It was Major Black, the squadron commander. So, off we went. And we hit our target of Toyama, and we heard the next day at our debriefing that it was destroyed 99.5 percent.

John: What was the name of the place?

Wetter: Toyama. And it was fire-bombed, and there was nothing left. Well, when we came back and landed at Saipan, at our base, we got off the plane and got into a six-by-six, or two and a half ton truck, to take us to our debriefing area, our crew from the States happened to land at about the same time and our trucks were almost side by side at one point. "Did you just get here?" And I said, "Yea." "But you left yesterday!" I said, "Yea." "Oh. What took you so long?" "Well, we had a side trip up to Japan last night." They go, "Oh. Oh." But, anyhow, that was, they do strange things. That was kind of an experience. I have an article written about one mission that I felt proud to be on.

John: Take your time. This is a great story.

Wetter: In those missions, I flew on a couple of them, were after the dropping of the bomb

on Nagasaki, August 9, I don't know who in the government had this foresight, but it's hard to understand the Army doing something in a good logical order. But whoever did this did a great job. The bomb had been dropped and I think a day or two later we got a notice to report to our hardstand, or revetment, and some Navy trucks are going to be pulling up, and you are going to unload those trucks by your airplane. And each truck had, probably about four trucks to an airplane. And we unloaded supplies, clothing, medical and food. Canned food type food. So we unloaded them, and the next day they said, "Now, we are going to start packing them. And here is how you pack." And they told us, so we packed them and, I don't know, probably we had about six or eight tons. I think one drop would supply five hundred prisoners of war.

John: Oh, okay.

Wetter: Food for the prisoner of war camps because our government must have been working through the Swiss or the Swedes, I don't know who. I don't know which one but they were negotiating after Japan capitulated but the signing of the peace had not been done. So, another demand, I think, from our side was, "We want to know where all your prisoner of war camps are. Every foreign national to you, we want to know whether they are Belgian, or English or Americans, and so on, and we don't care if they are just in Japan, the Phillippines, we want to know." Because they wanted do some humanitarian missions. So, anyhow, we packed these supplies in canisters. Some looked like a torpedo. Not quite as long, a metal canister. Others were in fifty-five gallon drums. And, boy, we sure knew how to pack them, I tell you. How not to pack them, we did, because after they were packed, we put a harness on them. Get them loaded into the bomb bays and hook a shroud line from a shackle which releases the bomb, if it was a bomb, or this here, I can't remember what they called the cord. This twenty-foot rip cord from the shackle to the barrel. And so both bomb bays were loaded. But we didn't realize what we had really done wrong until our first prisoner of war mission was, we had terrific directions: "Go up to Japan, it's around the city of Nagoya." Around. Not northwest, southeast, no nothing, just around. Not five miles, not whatever, just around. And it is very hilly, and raviny in that area. And we learned that there were, I think, twenty-four prisoners, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five prisoners in that camp.

John: Oh, wow.

Wetter: And another requirement was that these camps had to be identified with a sign, a six foot sign. White background, almost like a piece of plywood. I don't know what they had. But four feet wide, six feet high, a P would be on one, a W would be on the other. So that we could see it. And they were supposed to be put in a prominent place where it could be visible from the air. Well, we were searching around Nagoya, and around, and around, and just everybody is looking and looking, and we are flying at probably about two or three thousand feet to get

good vision. And, we couldn't find them. And the flight engineer says, "Hey, John, you know we are not going to make it back to Saipan. We can get to Iwo." Of course, Iwo was in our hands. And so John says, "Okay, we'll make two more circles." I don't know who saw them, who saw the sign first, but I didn't. "I think I see something!" "Yea? Where?" By gosh, there it was, on a kind of a little clearing on a slope of a hill. And you could only see it from probably, we'll say, from the south. Or the southeast, A little bit, or the southwest. Because there were trees, very wooded. So we found it and, man, we buzzed that place at about two hundred feet, and those prisoners of war were, the first time we went over, it was like zoom! We went over another time and, man, they are waving. I thought they could fly. Their hands were going up and down. And so then we made sort of a practice run for our bombardier. And so the next trip we went over and they said you could drop them at four hundred feet. Well, we dropped the first bomb bay at four hundred feet and those overloaded packages, when that shroud line became taut, just it pulled the chute right off of the barrel, mostly the barrels acted this way. Or they plummeted, the chute did open, turned inside out, too much weight for the size of the chute, and they come down like bomb. And we probably had about eight barrels in one bomb bay, and then a lot of canisters. So the canisters opened and they went down the way they was supposed to go down. One of the barrels hit the guard shack, and the guard happened to be outside of the little cubicle, and that was splintered.

John: Oh, wow.

Wetter: Then we thought, oh, man, we're going to kill them. And a couple of, one might have hit the fence. Most of them were outside, because it was a very small camp. So the next time we come around, I said to George, I said, I had a camera. At one hundredth of a second, which is slow. And we were going as slow as we could, probably about two hundred and twenty miles an hour. And I am sitting in the back bomb bay and I was positioned where I could take a picture when George would say, "Now!" And I would move the camera, try to sequentially move it at the right speed, click it at the right time so I wouldn't get a blurred picture. So, anyhow, George said, "Now!" and I took the picture and some of the canisters, they all went out the bomb bay. And I got some of the canisters opening and probably some of the barrels with the chutes just starting to open and a picture of two or three people on the ground.

John: Oh, wow.

Wetter: The sides were blurred, but those guys came out.

John: That's great. That's tremendous.

Wetter: Yea, and so I have a picture of that. And, so anyhow, we dropped at eight hundred feet the next time and the same thing happened. But then the occupants of the

prison knew, get the hell out of the way. A fifty-five gallon drum of relief supplies on your head.

John: Especially when you are on your way home.

Wetter: But, anyhow, it was very gratifying to be able to do that.

John: Yea. I'll bet.

Wetter: We did another one in Shanghai. Outside of Shanghai, China, where three of us went over a camp with five thousand prisoners. And we couldn't get them to go to one side of the camp. They had a nice big camp and we were buzzing, buzzing, trying to get everybody to get to one side so we, because we knew what was going to happen on the other side, but we packed these a little different. So, we couldn't get a clear spot and we didn't want to drop them on the outside where the Japanese might say, "Screw you guys. We're keeping it ourselves." We dropped them right over the barracks, and they went through the roof. Didn't get between the barracks. Went through them. And I understand one person wasn't feeling well was killed on the inside. But, anyhow.

John: That must have felt pretty good.

Wetter: You bet.

John: Dropping bombs is one thing.

Wetter: Well, you know, dropping bombs, I think my attitude was better you than you doing it to me.

John: Oh, yea.

Wetter: I don't think it bothered me.

John: I just read in the paper the other day that they finally got the *Enola Gay* in the Smithsonian this week. There was a lot of controversy on that because, years ago, people were saying that represents the start of the nuclear age. What they are missing is that represented the end of the war.

Wetter: Well, the veterans organizations, they all jumped on the band wagon and really beat that thing, saying, from what I read, was whoever was the head more or less apologizing to the Japanese for using the atomic bomb. And I have a feeling on that.

John: So do I.

Wetter: My feeling, I am really going to jump ahead to 1995 when I, not just myself but about four hundred or four hundred and fifty marines or B-29ers, some Navy personnel and civilians, your sons, grandkids or whatever, went on this tour going back either to Guam, Saipan. I chose Saipan. Iwo Jima. And when we got there, it was a nine day tour. When we got to Saipan at one point, I don't remember what day, but at one point a Japanese interviewer from Tokyo saw my B-29 hat and stopped me and asked me if I would consent to an interview. And I said, "Yes." When we landed on that island, Lieutenant General Snowden had us all together and said, "You know, when we go back to Iwo, or even here on Saipan, don't bad-mouth the Japanese. Don't call them Japs. Be civil to them. Don't say, 'Hey, you guys can't fight worth a darn.'" Let's have a little respect on both sides. And don't talk about the atomic bomb." Well, at this interview, this young man, twenty-eight, thirty years old, was very nice. Spoke very good English. And asked me where I was born, when I came over, what island I was on, what I did, and so on. So I answered his questions, and when it was all over, I said to him, "I'd like to ask you a question. Now, you don't have to answer it." I said, "But how does your generation feel about the use of the atomic bomb?" And he thought for a few seconds and he said, "I don't think they should have used it." And I said, "Oh, okay. I can respect that." I said, "I have the opposite opinion, and here is why. I didn't have all my missions in and from what I have known over the years, that our government thought there would be about a million casualties on our side and between one and two million on your side. Granted, in two flashes, a hundred and thirty-five thousand people, your people, were gone." I said, "You hate to weigh one against the other, but it could amount to three million people. Really, foremost in my mind is I might have been one of them."

John: Absolutely.

Wetter: And here I am today. And he said, "Well, thank you."

John: I've talked to so many guys who would have been in the invasion force if they had to have landed. Everyone of them feels exactly the same way.

Wetter: Well, I've learned something even more recent was that, oh, at one point in time after the hostilities, probably a day or two after the 9th of August, many B-29's were sent up to Japan fully armed but no bombs to count Japanese aircraft that would be put on the runways, not facing down the runway, facing across the runway with the propellers off in front of them. We were to count them, and when the tally was in, the count was between forty-five hundred and five thousand aircraft that they had. We didn't know that. All their airfields were bombed out but they were taken on little roads, taken to a field, and camouflaged them, maybe within a mile or so of the airfield. So, if they wanted to get them up, they could get them up. And their thought was, to save them for the invasion. But later on I even learned there were over ten thousand aircraft that they had and that maybe two thousand, twenty-five hundred were going to be used kamikaze against B-

29's. Three thousand kamikaze against navy ships, and maybe some of the others in reserve for whatever they had to do after that. I said, that invasion, I would think, would go under. We would never make it. So, now I am more affirmadley that we did the right thing.

John: Yep. I agree.

Wetter: I got a humorous story. A B-29, I have to give you a little background. When an engine on a B-29 must be replaced, for whatever reason, they replaced it and then you take that airplane up with a skeleton crew, five people, one always in the back, and I always volunteered to go in the back. I liked to fly. And we would fly that airplane for eight hours. We'd take off with three engines, with the power to take off, the other one just kind of idling. And after you idled it for, let's say, an hour, they'd increase the rpm (rotations per minute) on the one engine. Another hour, they'd give it an increase, and you'd do this for eight hours. Well, between the seventh and eighth hour, of course, I am reading my comic books. I had to keep up to date. Somebody said, "Hey! There's a carrier! There's a carrier!" Of course, it is on the ocean. We were flying at about five thousand feet and those guys are playing bridge up in front. Put her on automatic pilot, but somebody happened to see it. And John Hunter, our commander, said, "Hey, Bob, you know the call of the day?" I said, "Yea." An Aldis lamp is like a rifle with a light sight, and you can flash it. So I flashed di-dah, dah-dah-di-di, which is AZ. And they are supposed to return ZA. Well, we were circling the carrier, flashing and flashing. And pretty soon somebody answers ZA. So, the pilot says, "We're coming in for a landing." To the crew. Everybody knew a B-29 does not fit on a carrier. It takes five thousand feet to stop them, to begin with, and it's not wide enough, the deck isn't wide enough. So, he says, "Okay, Bob. Tell me what engines," and the airplane was going to be on the left side. "Tell me what engines. Number One and Two? What is over the deck?" So we come in on the downwind leg and start dropping the flaps fifteen degrees, on the base leg dropping them to thirty degrees, dropped the wheels. Come in on the approach leg. And here was this little guy, he wasn't in his uniform, but he had his orange paddles. Waving those paddles like, man.

John: He was giving you a wave off!

Wetter: Yea. But there was no aircraft on the deck. So we went over it about maybe twenty feet. Anyway, zoop! As we came closer, he dove into the little net, and I could see looking ahead guys running all over that deck, trying to get who knows where. I said, "John, Number One and Two engines." "Oh, we don't fit, huh?" "Yea." "Well, we'll fit this way." Broadside. And we started below the deck. And so the deck was above us. And came towards that, I forget what they call the side of a ship, but came in broadside, and just pulled up over the hanger, not the hanger, the deck, and right up over the tower and away we went.

John: Those sailors are probably still talking about that.

Wetter: I keep asking people when I see them if they ever had a B-29 buzz them. I've never run into anybody. But that was very humorous. And, of course, after the war...

John: How many missions did you fly?

Wetter: Four.

John: Four?

Wetter: Four. And then the war happened to end. And coming back, I joined the 52-20 Club. That was great. For fifty-two weeks, the government would give you \$20 if you looked for a job. And the intention was, you looked for a job. And some of them spent the time on the beach, anything but. Training for welfare. You know. The first part of welfare, I guess. But, anyhow, I probably was on it four or five weeks and got a job. I lasted there about a month. That wasn't for me. So, then...

John: This was in Milwaukee?

Wetter: Milwaukee. Yes, over in Milwaukee. And I started to work for the railroad. The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Pacific, or the Milwaukee Road. As a locomotive fireman. And in those days, the steam engines, the diesels were just coming in, and because I didn't have enough whiskers, I didn't have enough seniority, like none, and some of them had worked there forty years. And they took all the easy jobs. I got the ones where I could shovel coal for about two and a half years before I got on the diesels. Very sparingly, I had enough seniority to get one of the worst diesel jobs. But that was the way it worked. And I stayed there a little over five years. And went to, took advantage of the GI Bill and went to DeVry School of Electronics in Chicago.

John: I was going to ask, did you use the GI Bill for anything else?

Wetter: No, just for school. And went and took a course in electronics, and from there I worked for Kenwood TV in Milwaukee, who was a TV store. Sold TV, no white goods. TV's and electronics. And worked for them as a service man. And they had a very good reputation.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

I worked for them as a service man for five or six years, and happened to service a TV set that the gentleman offered me a job, at AC Spark Plug. They were in the electronics business with the ballistic missiles. Their electronics consisted of guidance systems. And so he offered me a job and I took it because I was working

nights, kind of from noon till nine o'clock at night, Saturdays, I had a family and was married. And this job was a day job, which it really wasn't. I didn't have enough seniority to be on days. So I started on second shift. But, anyhow, I got paid time and a half on Saturday, or double time on Sunday. But, anyhow, I started there and stayed there twelve years. Until they got out of that business. And enjoyed that very much. We were on the cutting edge of technology. And it was very, very interesting. The only thing is, I could talk on this forever.

John: I know.

Wetter: Some of the things that went on. But I want to back up to the Army days when they would give us physicals, and one of them was, especially if you were on an air crew, they'd take you in the altitude chamber. There would be fifteen of us seated in this air compressor tube, two instructors and fifteen of us. And as you walked in, they would say, "Okay, take a seat, anywhere. Okay, put on the headsets." And they would start talking, explaining what this was all about. "We are going to go up to thirty-eight thousand feet, in increments, and we want to teach you the effects of anoxia, lack of oxygen. How it affects a person." So, okay, so he says, "Okay, put on your earphones." And he says, "By the way, right behind you is a button. If you feel dizzy, have any problem at all, you hit the button and the pump stops right there. And one of us will come over and ask what the trouble is." Well, we didn't put on our oxygen masks until we got over ten thousand feet. So we get up to ten thousand feet and they stopped, and said, "Everybody okay?" Yea. Okay, up we go. He said, "If you have a toothache, hit the button and go." Well, we get up to about twelve thousand feet and I go (motioning toward his teeth), a little one. "Okay, now we are going to go up a little higher, and you are going to see if this continues." Well, we went up another two thousand feet, whew! It hurt, big, big hurt. Stopped. They said, "Okay." And they had another smaller chamber attached to the big one that would hold two or three people. So they would equalize both of them at the same altitude, or pressure. I'd go to that one. The other students would go up, I would go down. I would get down, evidently they had talked to the guy on the desk down below. "Okay, go over to that building across the street and, that is the dental building, and they will take care of you." Well, I walk in, the dentist says, "Okay, which tooth?" It doesn't hurt there, at ground level. "Open your mouth. Upper or lower?" "I think it was the upper." "Well, which side?" "Well, I don't know." "Well, you got four cavities on this side." "Okay." Ripped all four of them out.

John: Oh, wow.

Wetter: And redid them. He said, "Okay." So the next day I went up again and there was two seats in that chamber where you didn't want to sit. Seats 7 and seat 13, because to impress the rest of us, this is what happened when you got up in altitude. At about sixteen thousand feet they stopped the pumps and the instructor said to seat number 7, "Okay, take off your oxygen," and I think he took it off at

about ten thousand. They didn't put any oxygen on at all. Those two seats. And at sixteen thousand feet, they stopped and they handed one person, what do you call this on a pad?

John: Clipboard?

Wetter: A clipboard. With a lined paper. "Write your name, rank and serial number. On each line. Not fast." And the other fellow said, "We'll come to you later. Seat 13." So at sixteen thousand feet they'd stop and they'd pass the clipboard out. "How is his handwriting?" "Looks about the same as he started." Eighteen thousand feet, his handwriting was getting like he learned to write in first grade. And when we got to eighteen thousand feet, he said, "Hey, Joe, take off your left boot." He must have repeated that fifteen times. And finally, this fellow kind of, "Oh, I understand. I'm supposed to take off my left boot." And he kind of reached down and gets his left boot off. "Now, put it next to your foot. Put it next to your foot." And kept this up for a while. And finally, put it next to his foot. Went up to twenty thousand feet and that fellow that was writing his name, you couldn't tell. You couldn't tell nothing, just shakes. Just shaking. And the person with the boot, they gave him a boot, a wooden shoe. Wooden. No cut out. Very roughly hewed out in the shape of a foot. Four inches wide, and so on. And they said, "Put it on. Put it on." And finally, after so many commands, the guy tried to put on this wooden shoe. And about twenty one thousand, they both collapsed. And they said, "Now, watch this." Well, they gave them oxygen and whew! Just like that, within seconds, they come to. This guy starts to write his name, and he stopped. "I didn't do this." This other guy with the shoe says... And he had thirteen witnesses, and they said, "Yes, you did do this," and they said, "No, we didn't."

John: I'll be darned.

Wetter: They did not think they did what they did, so they went up with the next group, and they did not sit in those chairs, so they could say, "I guess we did." The idea behind that was educate us that, when you are flying, on oxygen, whenever you inhale, we had a, I forget the real name, but lips, metal lips kind of, would open up every time you took a breath. And you watched everybody's oxygen, so that you could see they were getting oxygen. Because within a couple of minutes, if you are firing at somebody or shooting at somebody, you don't want the guy unconscious.

John: Yea.

Wetter: So they were impressing on us, you can't tell. You think you are perfectly normal. And, buddy, you are out of it. Watch everybody.

John: Oh, you don't know that? I see. I see.

Wetter: You have no idea. It sneaks up on you like, I was very impressed. That was one of those tests back then. Okay, now, where, I got to bring us up to date. Well, I worked for AC for, AC Electronics, for twelve years, and from there I went to the United States government as a quality assurance representative, and because of my education and background that I picked up along the way, I was qualified in the electronics and in fabrication. And they sent me to school. I think I have sixty-three, I call them diplomas, for various aspects of other training. The government does believe in training their people.

John: Yea. Oh, yea.

Wetter: So, that was very helpful.

John: When you got out, did you do anything with vets organizations? The VFW or the Legion, or anything?

Wetter: I would say in '46 I joined the Purtell Shue Legion Post. (discussion of spelling of Purtell Shue) And I think they went defunct in about four years, because I think I only went a couple years, and things were just, too much bickering. And so I dropped out. And I joined the VFW in Florida about six years ago, and became the quartermaster for five years and now I am just a member. But I enjoyed my quartermaster job.

John: How about reunions? Get-togethers?

Wetter: Oh, yea, I went to a reunion in Denver for the 73rd Bomb Wing, which I was in. Now, let's break it down. I was in the United States Army Air Corps, 20th Air Force, 73rd Bomb Wing, 500th Bomb Group, 883rd Squadron.

John: Okay.

Wetter: The 73rd Bomb Wing, it's about fifteen thousand people. I think. So there were the 314th, 315th, 68th, sort of had one reunion. I guess it's too massive, especially for lodging in the old days. So we get out reunions together, the 73rd. Went to one in Denver, ah, Colorado Springs, which is very nice and stayed at the Air Force Academy. And then Roanoke, Virginia, a few years ago, which is, again, very interesting. And next year, we are going to Weston, Virginia, about twenty miles northeast of Washington.

John: It's beautiful there.

Wetter: And you brought up the article about the *Enola Gay*. And, yes, it's together and just this Friday or so, it's going to be...

John: Just in the paper.

Wetter: Yes, it's going to be on display. And we are going to go see it. I was there a few years ago visiting a daughter in Maryland and they took me to the Smithsonian. And they had a guard, an armed guard there because that is when that big controversy came on. People were walking in, trying to throw all kinds of stuff. They were against the use of it. The B-29 was bad. And so they only had a very small part of its fuselage on display. And I think the veterans organizations and probably other civilians, as well. Other people, as well, felt like I do. And they finally put it together like I think it should be. Yes, it was terrible. No, we shouldn't use them again. And I better compliment our government over these past fifty years, or sixty years, for not using it. That ought to show the world, hey, we understand, it's not to be used. In fact, it would be nice if there were no war.

John: Yes. Yea.

Wetter: That would be the goal.

John: This is a tremendous story. This is a great story. Looking back on it, nobody wanted years of their life taken away from them, like the time you had to serve. But, what's your memory, feeling about it?

Wetter: I did have a thought cross my mind. I enlisted. I did it on my own. They didn't have to come and get me. And, I guess I have a very different attitude. Whatever they handed out, I took it. In fact, another little story about being at college, when I lived at the university as a cadet, on Wednesdays, we ran five miles. On Fridays, we ran seven, for PT (physical training). In Tennessee, in the summer. It was hot. But about, we ran around the campus. In one spot, we stopped in the shade. There were at least fifty of us in the group. And not only shady, but there happened to be an outside Coke machine. For a nickel. And we stopped there. Well, the first month, of course, there was a rule that we don't stop for a Coke. It was just *verboden*. Bad things happen. Well, anyhow, our quintile leader, the leader of the fifty men, one day, one Wednesday, stopped, went up to the Coke machine, and got a Coke. Well, the next Wednesday, I took a nickel along and he did that again, and I followed him. And it was cold! It was good! So I drank my Coke, you know, and then, I am going to say Thursday, the same quintile leader, I was on the second floor, he was on the third floor, I believe. And we had to fall in for formation. So, we were in the dormitory, and they had a kitchen. We could go out certain doors and not go out others. Well, this one not-go-out-of-door was closer to the formation that day and our quintile leader came down the stairs and I followed right behind him. And we had to run like hell to get there on time. He went out the wrong door, and I followed him. So we get in formation, and on Friday out comes the penalties. I had dust on my shoes. That was one point. And you could get away with three points without walking an hour. Well, having a Coke was five, going out the wrong door is five. Now, they don't give you the three free ones any more. Now, it is ten, actually, eleven. So here I am on a

Saturday morning with three other guys. I've got a picture of this. And here we are walking, in kind of a rectangle. And must have walked an hour and a half and man, we were all wringing wet. And Lieutenant Turner, who was in administration, came up. "Detail, halt!" Aviation Cadet Wetter, fall out and follow me. Detail, attention! Continue tours!" I followed him into his office. He had fan going. Was that [unintelligible]. I'm standing there and he says, "Why are you walking tours? Why are you walking tours?" I says, "Well, because I had eleven gigs." "Well, what were they for?" I says, "Five were for stopping to get a Coke." "Oh. Did anybody else get a Coke?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Do you know who?" I says, "No, sir. I followed him. I did not see his face." He says, "All right, how did you get the others?" "Went out the wrong door." "Were you the only one that went out the door?" I says, "No, sir." "Who went out the door?" "Sir, I was following him and didn't see his face." Somebody must have squealed, but it wasn't me. He says, "Aviation Cadet Wetter, you are relieved of tours. Take a shower, pick up your pass, go into town. But, before you do that, you get (you have to be an enlisted man to go into the aviation cadet program) you get Sergeant Stehling and tell him to report to me, as is, right now." Evidently, they didn't give him a pass. And he didn't know why, at the time. I run up to that third floor, knock on his door, I says, "Sergeant Stehling, Lieutenant Turner wants to see you, as is, right now." He was in his shorts. And he went down, and I got all cleaned up and walked out. Sergeant Stehling was marching in my place.

John: Do you know how to spell his name?

Wetter: I think it is S-T-E-H-L-I-N-G. I can't think of his first name. But I got even with him.

John: Yea. I remember once I was on guard duty, around a PX (post exchange), midnight to four, and there was a Coke machine, and there was a street light and there was a nickel. And I knew someone was in the bushes waiting. I picked up that nickel, and did about five tours, and bought a Coke out of the machine. Nobody came out of the bushes. Boy, that tasted so good! I was expecting some sergeant come out of the bushes.

Wetter: Setting you up, eh?

John: Yea. This is a tremendous story. This is a great story. I need to get your address.

Wetter: Okay, I've got two of them.

[End of Interview.]