

Charles T. Gotham
Narrator

Jim Carozza
Interviewer

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JC: Well, Charlie, I want to thank you for sitting down and giving your narrative to the Library of Congress. This is Charles Gotham—do you like to go by Charlie?

CTG: Right.

JC: Well Charlie, I want you to tell us how you got involved in WWII. You live in Canton, PA now. You're originally from Potsdam, NY?

CTG: Yes. We moved down here in 1934 from there, down to Elmira.

JC: How old were you – how did you get involved in the service?

CTG: I was drafted. Date of induction was 28 December '42.

JC: And where were you first mustered to?

CTG: Binghamton. I remember going down there and we were inducted in there. Then they let us go home. They brought us back to Elmira and then we entered the service on January 4, 1943. So, they allowed us to have New Year's Eve off. I went to Fort Niagara, that was an induction center. Almost anybody from here went to Fort Niagara. From there, we got our shots, we got our clothing, things like that. From there a group of us were taken to Biloxi, Mississippi for our basic training. We were down there – I think we had six weeks of training while I was in there – then they would ship you out and there were different places or different organizations. I was still in the Air Force, Army Air Corps.

JC: Technically, Charlie, you were in the Army. You were in the Army Air Corps.

CTG: Right. So, then I was walking down the street there in Biloxi on the base, Keyser Field. That's what it was. When I was asking down there it said, "Be an air gunner, be a sergeant in six weeks." I said, "That's for me." So, I walked in and I signed up, and I signed up to be an air gunner. I didn't know what an air gunner was or anything like that, but it sounded good to me. I wasn't going to be a private – I was going to be a sergeant in six weeks so that sounded good to me. I had to wait a little bit to get into a class, air gunner class, and finally after about ten weeks – I was down there after the training about four weeks – I went to Las Vegas, Nevada for air gunnery and I was down there for six weeks and we learned everything that was about guns.

JC: For which airplane, Charlie, or were they just trying to...

CTG: Just gunners.

JC: I got you, they were just training you on guns in general.

CTG: Right – in general.

JC: Air support guns in general.

CTG: We did training on the ground, you'd be on the back of a truck and you're trying to hit a target that's moving. Then we had a week of air. Well then that was in AT-6. I can't remember what that, there was three of them, AT-6 and B-17 and I can't remember what that other one was.

JC: The other airplane?

CTG: It was an AT-11. We went out. We did that. The AT-6, you see those all the time if you go to any air show, you see AT-6's. After that, we had graduation and they shipped us to Denver, Colorado. But first you went to Buckley Air Base, I think it was, and then there was another– Lowry Field was also there– so we spent time at Buckley and then we went to really get educated on turrets and things like that. We went to Lowry Field which is right next door, near Denver. So, after we spent time there, they thought we learned enough and they shipped us... We left and I went to Salt Lake City and then I was shipped out to Tucson, Arizona from Salt Lake City.

JC: They were moving you around pretty good.

CTG: Oh yes.

JC: Let me interrupt you for a second. Were you training up in the airplanes yet, or was this all ground training?

CTG: No, we flew in those AT-6's and you had a ring in the back seat, in the back of the pilot, and the top was off from it and you had to... we had thirty calibers there and they had, oh well, it was a tow target he'd find there, they're shooting and you had a certain color on your bullets so they'd know who hit the target.

JC: Oh, that's interesting.

CTG: Then the B-17, I think it was only on the wing, the waist area, that we had any trouble with that and I can't remember what the AT-11 was, I can't remember that at all. But when I left for Salt Lake then I got mixed up with a bomb group and they were training down in... And we got on a plane, we were assigned a crew, we were assigned a pilot and a co-pilot and we took a little training there but then all of a sudden, they yanked me out, well, I guess with the whole crew, not that crew.

JC: Not the crew in the photograph.

CTG: Yes, this was way back.

JC: This was one of your firsts...

CTG: Then, we left there and they said, "You're going to Orlando, Florida," so I never did get my duffel bag unwrapped – all I did was just take stuff out when I needed it.

JC: You never unpacked.

CTG: Yes, I never unpacked. I got down to Orlando, Florida and I was assigned to... There were four crews. We were in advance training down there and we were being trained for lead crews. When you got into a whole group which is made up of four squadrons and then we would be the top dog and we were supposed to be trained.

JC: Sort of the point airplane. Obviously the most dangerous aspect of the entire squadron.

CTG: Yes, you could say that.

JC: How did you feel about that?

CTG: You don't have that feeling of danger or anything. It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed ourselves. Down in Orlando we flew from Orlando, Florida to Corpus Christi.

JC: Texas?

CTG: Yes, Texas, you were over water, that's all you see but it's enjoyable. Nothing bothering you. Nothing bothered us when we left there and then we went to Biggs Field in El Paso and I was there for about three or four weeks and then we were sent to Pueblo, Colorado and we got our group. That's when we formed the 491st group and the four squadrons. Mine was the 855th. Well, the ones that came in there had already had the first phase—what we call the first phase of training.

JC: They were a little more experienced or farther along in their training?

CTG: They were [unclear] and they were along in their training, but we came in as the lead crew and we actually ended right up just the regular crew. But, while we were down there, the colonel—he was a major at the time—he ended up being the CO of 855th and then we had to get a new pilot. So that's when we got Ken Boyd, our pilot.

JC: From the photograph?

CTG: Yes, he's the one in the middle in the back.

JC: I'd like to show this to the camera. So, growing up did you ever think you'd be involved in such an operation? [Holds up photograph of several soldiers and points out Ken Boyd] This is Ken Boyd, right here?

CTG: Yes.

JC: So, this is your crew?

CTG: Yes, that's the crew.

JC: Growing up, you never thought you'd be involved...?

CTG: I did like airplanes. Down where Broadway school is, they used to have barnstormers come in there and that was really the polo ground too, they played polo in that area. That's when I had my first ride in an airplane. I was probably about fourteen, no, probably about ten or twelve, something like that. But anyways, so then we finished our three phases of training in Pueblo, Colorado and we were told we were going overseas. "You'd better go home, get a furlough," they'd give you a furlough and you go on home for ten days and then when you come back, you'd be going overseas.

JC: Is this approximately?

CTG: It was March.

JC: Spring of '44.

CTG: I'm all through with my training and everything in twelve months or fourteen months. So, you get everything—you get basic training and air gunnery training.

JC: Did you have the stripes like they promised you?

CTG: Yes, it took them... I got PFC at gunnery school and then when I got through with Buckley, they made me a Buck Sergeant. It took two weeks longer, but I still got them. So, three stripes and then when I went overseas, I got a [unclear] for Staff Sergeant and that's what I ended up with. So, we came home here, I did, and spent the ten days. There weren't very many guys around so there wasn't much to do.

JC: All your buddies were serving?

CTG: They were already there. And then, let's see ... So, then we got back to Pueblo, Colorado. We all came back from furlough and we headed for overseas. We didn't know what our orders were for outside of the United States, but we knew where we had to go in the States and Herington, Kansas was the first ride and we went in there and they did something to the plane. They added something to it, I don't know what it was.

JC: You weren't involved in that aspect of the plane operations?

CTG: No.

JC: You were in charge of...

CTG: Well, we just ...Everybody that was an officer was a gunner. So most of them knew as much as I did, you had to. We left Herington, Kansas and we thought we'd take a little ride. Our bombardier, that's the one on the left [points to photo], the bombardier...

JC: You remember his name?

CTG: Tommy Watson, he's still alive and so is the pilot, Ken Boyd. I see Ken about every year. Tommy Watson lives, I think, in Little Rock, Arkansas and I've seen him once since '45 or '44. We left, and here's Herington, Kansas up here [points to map] and we had to go to Florida, but here's Little Rock down here, so the officers made up, they decided, the pilot did, decided he'd go to Little Rock and buzz the town. Tommy threw out a message to his girlfriend. We were buzzing, we were really low. We got through there and there was a big spread in the paper in Little Rock. Then we went on to, I can't remember, it's the southern part of Florida

JC: Pensacola's farther north.

CTG: Somewhere down by Miami, it might have been Morrison and so then we stayed there for just a day and we got our orders to go overseas and they told us to fly such and such and when we got out there, Boyd opened up the thing telling us where we were going. That's when we found out we were...

JC: He opened the orders, the sealed orders?

CTG: The orders, so we knew we were going to England and so we flew from Florida to Belem, Brazil and we just spent a night and then we took off the following night and we went to Dakar, Africa, and that was twelve hours flying. Then we left there and we went up to Marrakech, North Africa. By that time, we were out of money so Tommy, the bombardier, he was our finance officer—we appointed him that—he could get somebody, he could get some money for us, so he got us some money and we went into Marrakech and it's a very bad town. It was, it was just crummy. I wouldn't want to go back there at all even though maybe they've probably cleaned it up a little bit but it was terrible. We took off from there and we went out on the ocean and we came into England

JC: You took a round-about way to get there.

CTG: Yes, we had to go out by Spain, Portugal and all the way around and then in to England. We went right into our base that we were assigned and then we got assigned our barracks and everything and we were in those Quonset huts, not all metal buildings. We flew a few missions there, I can't remember the name of the town.

JC: Into [unclear] Europe?

CTG: Yes. We practiced a little bit.

JC: Flying over northern England, Wales, Scotland?

CTG: Scotland or England, there's a lot of land there you could fly over. Just for practice and get in tune with what we're—especially flying in formation. The guys were pretty good about that but they had to sharpen themselves up. And, that's when they got sharpened up. They were told to sharpen up or leave. They couldn't find more and they were tough about it and we left... D-Day was the 6th.

JC: You got there around the end of March or the beginning of April?

CTG: May, we got there in May.

JC: So, you got there about a month before D-Day?

CTG: I flew on the 2nd, the 4th, and the 7th.

JC: Of June?

CTG: Yes. I flew the two days before on a mission and then I flew the day after D-Day.

JC: Your mission before, was it to drop a bomb, reconnaissance?

CTG: It was all bombs. The first one, the flak was intense. It's hard—if you've ever seen any of these shows where it's all black...

JC: They show the black bursts.

CTG: Yes, that's when you say it's intense. The next one there was none. And on the 7th it was light.

JC: So, already the air defenses of the Germans had been almost neutralized?

CTG: Somewhat. They moved all that down once we got in there. They moved all the anti-aircraft back to all the towns, back into Germany. On June 20th we went into a place called Winernes, France and on our way back we were right on the edge of town coming into the North Sea there.

JC: Heading back to England?

CTG: Heading back to England. One burst of fire came right near the tail and killed the tail gunner. And that was the 20th.

JC: He's not in this picture, is he?

CTG: Oh yeah, Jarrett's the second, right there [points to photo].

JC: What was his name?

CTG: Robert Jarrett.

JC: He got killed?

CTG: Well, he got hit and what it did was moved his spine in one direction and his heart in another and we hauled him out of the tail turret and brought him up

into the waist area and we got oxygen on him but we couldn't find where he was hit because he had all his stuff...

JC: All that gear on.

CTG: So, Ken—I think he got permission because you weren't supposed to do this—he broke formation and got as much out of the plane as he could and he got into our air base.

JC: He lightened the load on the plane to make it a little faster?

CTG: No, he gave it the gas. He got there and they took him off the plane and Ken went right to the air hospital with him, but he died in the hospital. The hard part about that was that Bob's brother was killed. He was a Marine and he was killed in the Battle of Tarawa.

JC: So, Bob and his brother, their parents lost...

CTG: Both, all family, there were only two boys.

JC: That had to be difficult for the parents.

CTG: Most of the missions were, by now, you're starting to feel what's going on, you know.

JC: You mean you gained a little more experience?

CTG: Yes, and you're feeling...

JC: You know what you're up against?

CTG: "Hey this could happen to me," you know. We stuck in there and then in November of '44 Ken and all the rest of the crew but me had thirty-five missions in and that's what you're supposed to have. They changed it. It went from thirty to thirty-five or something like that. But I was let off of the mission where we dropped supplies into Belgium. They took the ball turret out so he could drop supplies.

JC: What's a ball turret? Part of the airplane, one of the guns...

CTG: It had two fifty calibers in it, it was a round thing and you sat in it and you brought it up to get it up into the plane. You'd pump it with a hydraulic lift and then you had to put the guns down like that [points down] and then you'd open it up and you'd get out of it. That's how you would drop it down before you got in it and then you'd put the guns straight down and then you would drop down. I was in that about six missions.

JC: But now you're taking supplies to Belgium so it more or less became a loading area and less of a defensive...

CTG: All the B24's as far as I know dropped supplies into Belgium. That was in September. They didn't need so many guys running around; they'd rather have it

so you could put supplies in there. So, I volunteered to stay home. I didn't see any reason because we were...

JC: The fear of allied airplanes wasn't as great?

CTG: No.

JC: I mean Nazi airplanes.

CTG: We were quite sure that at that time that we were finishing with the pilot. If he got his thirty-five, the rest of the crew got thirty-five.

JC: Once a pilot did thirty-five, his entire crew got credit for it.

CTG: I suppose, under certain circumstances, if you lacked ten or fifteen missions, they wouldn't let you get away with that.

JC: So, you were looking at the end of your flying?

CTG: I figured out what the devil... In September. I don't know what number that was.

JC: You had tempted fate enough?

CTG: Yes, well that was all right with me.

JC: He's a brave guy, isn't he?

CTG: That was August 13th, no it was September. It was in September. So, they finished there. We lost one ship that day out of our group and then we went right back to our old standby of flying missions, so it came in October or November. Ken had his thirty-fifth mission. Then they told us that you had to finish; everybody had to have thirty-five.

JC: But you had to be fairly close to that number.

CTG: I had thirty-four because I was off on that one. I questioned it and I said, "Everybody else is leaving when the pilot gets his thirty-fifth," and they said, "No, we changed it." I said, "Okay." And they said, "Besides, you're going to stay here for three months and be an instructor," and I said, "Why?" "Well we don't have anybody else who's got any experience."

JC: You didn't necessarily see this as an honor then?

CTG: No. Well, I'm not going to get into that. My thirty-fourth with Ken was on November 9. So, I went out and I was an instructor, and I'd go out when the planes landed and talk to the guys and help in the armament shack and clean their guns and get them ready for the next day and I already knew all that stuff. Well, I did have a lieutenant for a captain, that was chief armament officer, but he didn't pay any attention. I mean you completed your...

JC: He had confidence in you. He knew you knew what you were doing.

CTG: So, we fooled around there but I knew I had to do one more so it came to 11/26...Now I flew my last for the 34th on 11/9. 11/26 – I made up my mind I was going to fly that day, so I hunted around for a good crew to fly with and geez, I found one with Captain Metcalf. He was lead crew and he needed a waist gunner, and I said, “That’s the one I want to fly with,” so I went with him. We went into, well I don’t know. The target was Hannover-Misburg, Germany.

JC: You flew over Germany.

CTG: On the 26th, went into there and we met flak, we met fighters, German fighters and by the time we got home we’d lost 16 ships out of 30.

JC: Wow. Now the American planes were leading daytime raids over Germany if I’m not mistaken.

CTG: The Americans were and the English were nighttime.

JC: What are your thoughts on that?

CTG: I think we could have had a better point, but we weren’t prepared. The 24 was a good plane. Everybody says, “That’s just a bundle of bolts.” But I really thought it was a good plane. I liked it better than I did the 17th. Most people would give me an argument on that. But we carried more bombs, we were faster and we didn’t think that we could fly higher than them, but they claimed they could but I don’t think the 24 could, but maybe. So, I finished that...

JC: The 35th mission, you really pushed your luck, I think. So, what did you feel when you landed back in England after that one?

CTG: Well, they said...

JC: Did you find your old crew and say, “Boy?”

CTG: They’d already gone home.

JC: Already back to the states?

CTG: Yeah, the lousy [unclear].

JC: They didn’t even wait for you?

CTG: They didn’t wait. Well, if you could get out of this one... We had a good crew.

JC: I was going to say... How did you feel about breaking up a crew that you had been with from the 34th?

CTG: Well it was tough. Everybody... We did go down to London together and we did have one hell of a time, but they had gone and so then I had to have four hours of flying to get my flying pay so I would just go out and somebody was hopping...

JC: Training over England.

CTG: Training or everything so I'd go up and I would get my four hours in and then I wouldn't do any more and then I'd get half pay, I mean time and a half. Then around February my time was up.

JC: February '45?

CTG: My time was up so they told me I was going home. I forgot, all this time that I was over there I forgot to write home.

JC: That's almost a year.

CTG: No, from the time that I finished in November to February, a three-month period.

JC: Well, shame on you.

CTG: I know it. It was terrible. The Red Cross were after me and everything else. Well, finally I came home and on-board ship—the war was over with in Europe in May. When I got into the place where you go to get out of there, where they send you, get you all set to go home, I had my wallet stolen and, like a nut, I reported it and they caught the guy. It was another GI and I had to stay for a trial, so that's why from February to May, I didn't... I was still in England and waiting for the trial. I finally got through with the trial and it took all I could do to get my money. I didn't have much, but I knew how much I had. They finally gave that to me, or sent it to me, I can't remember which. I came into Fort Dix...While I was onboard ship, the war was over with and I had 91 points, and you only had to have 85, I think it was, so I knew I was going to get out of the service.

JC: You were going to be mustered out as soon as you back to Fort Dix.

CTG: As soon as I got to Dix. I got into Dix and they started to get us out of the service and they mustered us out and I got out in May, May 25th. I didn't have much time in the service, but I had a nice trip.

JC: But I think the time you were in the service, you did a lot – thirty-five missions is certainly quite a bit, so that's more than... You certainly had your share of action. Let me ask you a couple of questions, if I could, Charlie. You mentioned...I don't think you were a very good letter writer; how did you stay in touch with your family?

CTG: When I was in England, I wrote. I wrote three or four times a week.

JC: Oh, that's good. Your Mom and Dad were back here in Elmira?

CTG: Yes.

JC: Did you have any brothers in the service?

CTG: No. They were all younger.

JC: I see, you were the oldest.

CTG: Of the boys, I'm the oldest. I wrote religiously to Mother and Dad and my future wife, I wrote her. I don't know what got into me, but I didn't write from February to May. That's when I didn't write.

JC: Maybe you felt that you were going to be getting out so quickly, and it just didn't work out.

CTG: I got out May 25th and then I took the train to Syracuse because a guy had won 3500 hours in a poker game and he says, "I've got to go to Syracuse, where are you going?" I said, "Elmira." And he said, "Well, why don't you go to Syracuse?" I said, "How am I going to get to Elmira?" He said, "Oh, you'll find a way. I don't want to go up there and be on any train with 3500 hours." And I said, "All right."

JC: You were like a bodyguard.

CTG: I went to Syracuse and I hitchhiked from Syracuse to Elmira.

JC: Did he give you five bucks or anything?

CTG: No. And I don't even know what his name is.

JC: You'd think he would have given you some coffee money.

CTG: So that was my experience in the service.

JC: That was your mission experience. But I want to ask you some questions about some of the other aspects if I could. One of the questions we like to ask, is what was the food like. But I think you probably did all right because you were on a base. So, what are your thoughts about the food?

CTG: The food was pretty good. We had English rations, because we were on their bases and their food isn't up to ours, you have to think that, and we had powdered milk and powdered eggs. We didn't have any fresh eggs that I remember. I didn't mind it. I was never a heavy eater. I'd rather have half a dozen candy bars than go into the mess hall but that's the way it was. One thing I would like to say, on Thanksgiving in '44 the radio operator met this fellow in a pub, and he said, "Why don't you boys come for your Thanksgiving to my house?" Well, he was making sixteen bucks a week and he was patching up the runways and things.

JC: He was a British civilian?

CTG: Yes, British civilian. We said, "Okay." We got ham and we got, I think there was frozen chicken or turkey, I don't know what it was, and we took it.

JC: Oh, you brought it.

CTG: We brought the food. When we ate, there were so many of us, there were six of us, they had us set up all by ourselves and they had another table in another room and that kind of upset us a little bit, but that was the only way they could do it. This is just a little story.

JC: No, these are the aspects that are interesting.

CTG: So then when we ate, we said, "You clear out, we'll do the dishes." Well they don't have all the facilities that we do, and so we totally wanted one dish for washing, and then we wanted another pan and so they heated the water and we kept going and the soap, the soap was a bar of soap; you couldn't make suds out of it if you tried. And she said, "What are you going to do with that other pan?" This is before we got going on anything. We said, "We're going to rinse the dishes." "Rinse the dishes, what do you mean?" "Well, we rinse the dishes after we wash them," and she says, "Well, we don't, we just take them out of the suds and drain them and wipe them." And, we said, "Well, today, they're being rinsed." So, she just stood there and watched us. She was very curious as to how we acted in the kitchen. But that was...

JC: But that was very nice.

CTG: It was excellent. They were very, very nice people. They had a nice little house.

JC: Was this right in London?

CTG: No, this was right in North Pickenham. We had moved from one air base to another one because of a bomb that blew up, so we moved over to North Pickenham. That was in that little town. It was small, a couple of pubs were about the only thing that's there and that was...

JC: You were overseas for one Christmas that same year.

CTG: '44.

JC: How did you celebrate Christmas that year when you were overseas?

CTG: I think I was right there at the base. They had a good meal. Our own mess hall, they always, on Thanksgiving or Christmas, you know. They were always excellent meals. I used to accuse them, because the mess hall was kind of in the middle and the officers ate here [moves arm to one side] and the enlisted men ate here [moves other arm to side] and I always said that the good pieces of the chicken went over to the officers and we got the junk.

JC: They got all the breasts and white meat?

CTG: They would get all mad at me but that was about it. So that was my life.

JC: That was your military life.

CTG: Well after I got out, I might as well finish it...

JC: Go ahead.

CTG: Well, after I got out of the service I got married in '45, '46 I went to Niagara University. I got a BBA and I graduated in 1950.

JC: Was the GI Bill...?

CTG: On the GI Bill.

JC: Very good. Your college education was financed on the GI Bill.

CTG: And we lived at Fort Niagara. They had made that into housing. That was where Ann and her husband came in up there at Fort Niagara.

JC: You're a Niagara Falls girl, are you? (directed offscreen to Ann)

Ann: No. I had just gotten married and he was going to Niagara and we became friends.

CTG: That's where I met her. The four of us went around quite a bit together. We lived on Fort Niagara and I was up there three and half years. Ann was there about two. Jack, her husband, already had two years of college and so he finished up and got his degree up there. We worked around.

JC: What was your degree in again?

CTG: It was a Bachelor of Business Administration.

JC: What was your first civilian job after the service?

CTG: You mean after I got my degree?

JC: Your career?

CTG: I was with Sun Oil Company and I guess they are still out in the big flats and I worked right there at the terminal and then I got transferred to Binghamton to the main office and then...

JC: Where was the main office?

CTG: Well, not the main office, but the branch office down in Binghamton. While I was down there, I went with GOF or Agway. I was a traveling auditor with them. I had a final office down in Somerville, New Jersey.

JC: So, your military training really didn't really help you in your civilian career so much?

CTG: No. Well, but it taught me how to pack.

JC: Travel light.

CTG: Then I was with them, and then another guy and I went in business for a couple of years, and then I made an application for... I started out at Lourdes Hospital in the office.

JC: Lourdes Hospital in Binghamton?

CTG: Binghamton, and I ended up being Vice President there.

JC: Well, congratulations. So, your military training certainly gave you a background?

CTG: Gave me good background, yes.

JC: Gave you the confidence.

CTG: It didn't bother me a bit.

JC: Yes, that's the impression I get—you were on some dangerous missions and it doesn't seem to faze you.

CTG: You know if you could copy this, I'd blow my own horn that's me getting my DFC.

JC: Well congratulations. Who's that – is that the commanding officer?

CTG: Well, I don't know who it is.

JC: I'll have to check on this. What I'll do is, see if we can... I'll leave this with... and see if we can make a copy. I don't know if we can do it right now, copy the photo, but that's quite an honor. So, you hang on to that and I can get back to you. I wanted to just hold up a couple of pictures of your planes and put them on the recorder. You want to just describe that plane briefly.

CTG: [Holds up picture of plane] Well, every one of our planes... ours was green on top and bottom on the tail and they had a number on them, F plus P minus O plus, and this doesn't show it but the tail underneath the star is the ball turret, right there, you don't see it. This is a nose turret and the tail turrets are back here and this, right by the V, there's a door or a window and then that opened up on the inside. You pulled it and it hooked up and in front of it, there was, well, like the old-fashioned kind of cars [moves photo back and forth] when they had the window – whatever you call them – right in front of the window.

JC: That little breeze. The window would give you a little breeze, like a shutter.

CTG: Shutter, yes, well, that's what was on there and you had to push that out because that wind would hit you inside.

JC: It was like a windbreaker.

CTG: Yes, so, that broke the wind and then you stuck your gun out so you could move around in there. Now the pilot and copilot were up in here and right in back of them was the radio operator and on the top, right here, on the top turret was the engineer and he stood... On takeoff and landing he was always between the pilot and copilot, in back of them and standing like this [points behind him], both of the guys are here...

JC: Overlooking their shoulders?

CTG: And check and make sure all the gadgets there...

JC: Mechanical gauges.

CTG: The gauges and everything were working properly. Now it's probably some of the engineer's job. Then when we got up in the air, he got up into the top turret. He was a gunner too.

JC: He had dual roles.

CTG: And the radio operator, he didn't have a turret but he knew how to shoot a gun. He stayed with us, he had a bench. And down in here was the bombardier and the navigator. And the navigator has his own little work area, bench and everything, and he did all his navigation. The bombardier, right about right there, he's looking at the... with the Norden bombsight. I got to tell you about the Norden bombsight. They made the Norden bombsight down in the old Rand plant.

JC: Okay, on the south side here.

CTG: Yes. I worked at Rand before I went in the service and I knew quite a few guys and they were older and they didn't go in the service or else they went in at 28 and they kicked them out. They were too old. They were all transferred down to the Norden plant. They all made that putt-putt, the little engine that went into the plane to generate... if you weren't running anything, it's like a little...

JC: Smaller engine?

CTG: Smaller engine and we called it the putt-putt, but it was enough to generate if you wanted to look around in the plane, certain lights were in the plane, then you could run that.

JC: Without turning the main engine on.

CTG: They were made down here.

JC: I did not know that.

CTG: Well, when I came home in March of '44 – see I'd been through that Norden bombsight, that whole thing – I helped take them apart, I helped put them together.

JC: You knew them inside and out.

CTG: So, I knew something about them. I didn't know beans, probably, but I knew something about them so I went down there to the Norden plant and I said... I went over the gate and I said, "I'd like to sign in and I'd like to see the guys from portable typewriters that are still down here in the plant." "Oh, you can't go in there." I said, "What do you mean, I can't go in there?" "Oh well, that

is strictly not for you to see,” and so I said, “What’s so hot about the Norden bombsight? I have been playing around with those for quite a while,” and the guy wouldn’t let me in. I knew he wouldn’t. I just did it.

JC: Wasn’t that interesting though that they were made on the south side and you were actually using them over in the war.

CTG: Oh, they were beautiful.

JC: I know. They were a very valuable tool.

CTG: You almost run out?

JC: I’ve got about two minutes and then I want to change the tape, and then I have a few more questions. I thought this leaflet you brought in was interesting, Charlie. This is a... [Holds leaflet up to camera]

CTG: Propaganda leaflet.

JC: From the allies. You describe it briefly.

CTG: Well, we had dummy bombs and they were, I think they were 250-pound casings and they would be stuffed with these, and then we would drop the bomb out. It would be with the rest of the live bombs, and those just float away and the people on the ground would get a hold of them. We did a couple of them. Most of the time you didn’t know that you had propaganda leaflets. But that’s what this one is. It does have something on the back but I messed that up.

JC: I think this has held up pretty well. It just says, “Safe conduct. The German soldier who carries this safe conduct is using it as a sign of his genuine wish to give himself up. He is to be disarmed, to be well looked after, to receive food and medical attention as required, and to be removed from the danger zone as soon as possible. Dwight Eisenhower.” It’s in German and English. I think that’s very interesting. You kept your records in good shape.

CTG: Well, yes. These are actually the records.

JC: I see that, your military records.

CTG: All my military records.

JC: Now how did you get access to those?

CTG: They gave them to us.

JC: Ok. My father, he was in the 9th division and he wasn’t as good a recordkeeper as you are.

CTG: On here, this is inter-department communication in Willow Run and it says, “To Mr. Armour, Office of the HH Bennet Willow Run, January 11, ‘45. Dear Bob – now this is my uncle – please accept Mrs. Place – that’s my mother – Mrs. Charles Gotham’s and my sister’s appreciation for the fine morning at the

Willow Run bomber plant. During their tour this week, it goes without saying that this could not have been possible if it were not for your kind expression of cooperation. I want you to know we all appreciate the courtesy very much. My sister, Mrs. Gotham, wants to tell her family upon her return to Elmira, as well as her son, now in France, who just completed his missions over Germany as a waist gunner on one of our B25's. Again, Bob, I say, "Thank you very much." That's my Uncle.

JC: Were those planes made on Long Island?

CTG: No Detroit, Willow Run. You know they built that Willow Run plant to build 25's.

JC: I did not know that. That's interesting.

Changes Tape.

JC: Explain this again, this little ceremony.

CTG: Well that was in November of '44. I was presented with the Distinguished Flying Cross. Now, let me explain just a little bit about what the Distinguished Flying Cross is. You had to complete a tour normally, and you didn't have to be a hero or anything like that, but you did have to have, I suppose you had to have your 35 missions or how many there were because the air medal... We got an air medal for every five missions and I got five air medals.

JC: You should have gotten seven.

CTG: Well I don't know, there may be six. They didn't give you one for the last one. I think that's the way it worked. They gave you this. [points to DFC]

JC: Was it the head of your squadron giving you the DFC?

CTG: No, it's a colonel, a full colonel but I'm not sure.

JC: Well, that's still quite an honor. Charlie, I just wanted, on the second tape here, do you have any recollections of practical jokes or, you mentioned a couple of times you went to London on leave for entertainment, but do any practical jokes come to mind to try and break up some of the boredom of camp life or was there always something going on that the boredom wasn't a factor?

CTG: Well, they had a lot of activities going on in London regardless of how many bombs were dumped on it. There was – I can't remember the name of it, but it was a big dance hall right there in Piccadilly Circus, near Piccadilly circus

JC: The Hippodrome?

CTG: No.

JC: That had to be a popular place.

CTG: Yes. They had a lot of nightclubs and nine chances out of ten you had to bring your own bottle because booze was too expensive, especially scotch. We spent a lot of time in pubs. Just simple pubs instead of nightclubs and all that. One thing I do remember is that we went into this, it was like a stage show, but all the girls, the lights were dim, the girls had little booths, maybe 5-6 feet wide and they had all the girls on the stage and they were naked, but they didn't move like the strippers or a burlesque show. That was just a backdrop. I don't know what else they did there.

JC: It wasn't like for amateur photography or anything?

CTG: No, that was very dim lights. You had to strain to see anything.

JC: Still a welcome break from...

CTG: Yes, you'd just go, in pay your money and see the girls.

JC: This had to be popular show.

CTG: Well it was, yes.

JC: How about practical jokes among the crew? There were seven in your crew?

CTG: There were ten of us.

JC: Did you guys live close together, you slept in the same barracks?

CTG: The enlisted men had their own, the officers had theirs.

JC: You still spent a lot of time together.

CTG: We used to joke with the navigator who was a real small guy and here he is a first lieutenant and he'd come out there and he had a lot of clothes on. The last thing you'd put on was your harness for your parachute. He'd come out there with all his papers and everything almost every day and he'd come there and he'd have his harness thrown over his shoulder and everything. Then he'd say, "Would somebody help me put my harness on?" So, then we'd get it on and then we'd lift him right up in the air and then he would get mad at us but he never quit because he had to have somebody helping him.

JC: He needed the help.

CTG: But he never... stuff like that, and, well, I suppose we used to say... Abe Ackerman. He was the first navigator we had and he never drove a car. He was from New York. Never drove a car. So down in Pueblo, Colorado, he stole a jeep or something; and got to get down to the end of the runway and he got off the end of the runway and he got in the mud and he left it right there. And then he came back and he said, "Hey guys, I can't get the car," or the jeep or whatever it was, "out of the mud down the end of the runway." We said, "Well, what are we supposed to do about it?" "Well, come on and help me". We said, "Forget it, Abe. They'll find it and they'll pull it out of there and they'll take care of it and no one

knows the difference. We won't say anything." Well, we got down in Belen and we'd been eating and then we'd been resting and then we came down to the office where we were going to sign up for a plane to go to Africa. There were a lot of jeeps out front and we said to the guy in there, "Hey, where's our plane?" They told us it was way down the end down there. "How are we going to go?" "Oh," he says, "There's lots of jeeps out there." "Oh, okay." We didn't pay him much attention. I hopped into a jeep, the guy got in and off we go down to the plane and, Jesus we just about got in the plane, underneath the wing and here comes an MP and he wanted to know who the SOB was that stole his jeep [laughs] and nobody's going to tell him, you know. I said, "Again, don't say anything that it was me. You'll keep me here." And the guy, he ranted and raved and pretty soon... He had another guy with him so they took the jeep back and he said, "But you'll hear from me." They finally found out that it was me and he said, "You'll hear from me when you get to the [unclear]." Well, I never heard anything from him. Probably a normal occurrence, but I thought, "This is a good way to start going overseas, get hung up in Belem, Brazil."

JC: I'm curious. You mentioned that Brazil was your first stop when you were traveling. Why Brazil – I thought Brazil was a neutral country.

CTG: Oh no. Well, we had an air base there. It was jump-off for Africa.

JC: So, it was supporting the Allied cause.

CTG: Well we were in Trinidad, we stopped in Trinidad and then we went to Belem. Nobody ever said. I really don't know.

JC: Well, you certainly got a tour of the world. You speak very highly of your fellow crew and your officers. How about the Germans, what were your thoughts about them as your opponents, your enemies?

CTG: To tell you the truth, we didn't run into any. We just felt, well, I mean they were doing the same thing as we were doing, running for the government. I don't know. We got an awful lot of... I've got a picture of two guys that came in from France after their plane was shot down and they're all dressed up in old, old clothes and everything, but the civilians were tough on us.

JC: The English?

CTG: No, the German civilians were real tough. They killed a lot of us.

JC: Any pilots that went down.

CTG: Yes, any of the crew, it didn't make any difference. Certain ones, not all of them. I suppose if you had your place bombed and here comes floating down some jerk from England, you'd probably be really teed off yourself.

JC: So that was something as anybody on a mission was aware?

CTG: Yes. Well, that's what happened to our navigator. He was afraid. He really was in a nervous state after about sixteen missions. It made you feel bad to go over there and you get shot at and everything and he came back and he said, "I'm going to quit flying." He said, "I'm not going to go over there and get knocked down and end up being fat, be boiled down for soap." He had that feeling that somebody was going to grab him and kill him.

JC: If he had to parachute into Germany, he felt that they were going to boil him alive and make soap. Was that like a common folklore?

CTG: No that was from him. He did, he quit and they put him to work. See, they can't make you fly, that was one thing. We were paid for flying fifty percent of your salary, and then you get the rank. The rank isn't any good, but...

JC: It had privileges.

CTG: Some privileges. So, it just...

JC: But they didn't want men flying who weren't 100% ...

CTG: For flying.

JC: 100% for their mission and flying.

CTG: Yes.

JC: A slight hesitation might have been a problem.

CTG: Oh yes, yes. I think I knew a couple of the high muckety-muck officers that felt sorry for him, but he said, "I have a wife and two kids," and this is really working on him you know, going on missions and have five or six bombers go down and then you come home again and you're worried about it. And he was really worried that he was going to go and he had his family and everything. But we were all... Even though I was drafted, I was enlisted. I enlisted in the Army Air Corps as a gunner. It had nothing to do with the...

JC: They didn't draft you into the Army.

CTG: They didn't draft me for that. You volunteered for that. I got a nephew that—he's dead now—but he was a colonel in the reserve and he looked this all up and I never knew that, and one day he said to me. "You know what, all you guys were volunteers." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You volunteered to do what you did." I said, "I did?" [Laughs] I thought that was only with one armed guy trying a wheel barrow.

JC: You mentioned a couple of your crew members were nervous about coming back on missions. Did you have any lucky pieces, any routine that you followed before every mission that you felt was lucky, did you feel any superstition or did any of the guys you were flying with, did they have any superstitions or lucky pieces? Something that they felt was important to bring them back?

CTG: I hate to tell you this but I wore the same heavy wool socks on every mission. Never washed them.

JC: You felt they were a lucky piece.

CTG: A lucky piece.

JC: Why are you embarrassed to say that? It got you back. Why would you focus on the socks?

CTG: I don't know.

JC: So, they went on the thirty-five missions with you.

CTG: Yes. I even brought them home.

JC: I would hope so.

CTG: But I don't know where they are now.

JC: You must have really thought there on that 35th mission when sixteen out of your thirty planes did not make it back, you must have really thought those socks were working well that day.

CTG: I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

JC: You mentioned the day your service ended. You were down in Dix, then you had to go up to Syracuse. Are you a member of a Veterans' organization?

CTG: I've been American Legion for sixty years

JC: Good for you. Other than flying the 35th mission medal, did you have any other medals or citations?

CTG: Well, the Air Medal and then the Europe – what do they call it? I know there's a name for it. [Consults notebook] Well, you can't knock this one. I had the Good Conduct Medal.

JC: Very good.

CTG: And the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with four bronze oak leaf clusters and the European African Middle Eastern Service Medal. Never did get that medal. I don't know why.

JC: You got the citation though.

CTG: Yes, I got the Good Conduct Medal. No, I didn't. Yes, I did too—Distinguished Flying Cross and the oak leaf clusters.

JC: Well, I think that was certainly quite a few there. Were you always confident in your equipment, specifically, like in your case, the airplanes, but did you ever worry that maybe your gun wouldn't work on a mission? How was your overall confidence in the equipment?

CTG: Well, I thought that was good. Course, you had to do your own guns, you had to get the right headspace and everything and the right amount of oil. You don't get too much oil because it will freeze up and all that stuff, although they claim that oil wouldn't freeze. You had to do those every night after you came from a mission; you had to clean them and then when you came out, you would dry them all off. When you came out in the morning if you were going the next day, you knew whose guts they were for the 50.

JC: What do you mean by guts?

CTG: The inside of the gun. It had parts that we had to be able to do in the dark.

JC: Know them inside and out. Know them blindfolded.

CTG: Yes.

JC: When the plane comes back, you do all that maintenance on your gun and then the next day the plane might take off on another mission, or was it always your crew on that plane?

CTG: No. You didn't have your own plane. We flew one quite a few times, but not what I would consider our plane.

JC: The planes were going up every day?

CTG: Mostly every day.

JC: At that time of the war...

CTG: Well, they were putting up practically thirty planes every mission.

JC: Now, I mentioned earlier that the Americans flew over Germany during the day and the British flew over Germany at night. Night flying was considered safer?

CTG: They thought so. So, did a lot of people here.

JC: What do you think?

CTG: Well they could see us. But you couldn't see us at night. Well, the search light would pick it up. They had nice, powerful searchlights.

JC: The Germans did?

CTG: Yes. I suppose they could line them up with anti-aircraft gun on the searchlight.

JC: But to pick out a target would have been difficult at night, and coming back had to be difficult – landing at night.

CTG: See they didn't fly in formation, but we did. We had three squadrons and it was ten planes in each formation. It's kind of like this, one, two, three [motions

with hands three staggered positions each above the other and each slightly to the left of the other], and so there'd be three planes in each one of those, so the lead plane, there's three over here, three over here and three over here, ten planes. You could practically see the pilot if you get up close enough.

JC: The pilot on your neighbor in the formation, you mean?

CTG: Yes.

JC: What kind of formation were the British using?

CTG: Nothing. Random, as far as I know. They just went in with maybe fifty or sixty planes, they'd put up a thousand and they'd just go up and they'd just have to watch and I suppose they would have some kind of lights on their planes so... We came back one time from Munich and oh, we were a mess. We had a hundred and thirty some holes in that ship. Didn't hit a person, but it knocked off one of the controls for one of the wings. I don't know which one it was. Well, we finally got to England and we... Over there they have balloons up about, I'd imagine, two or three hundred feet and they have their wire.

JC: Over Germany?

CTG: No over England, all over the coast, they have all these balloons and they have these wires holding them and you had to dodge them or go up above them and come back down.

JC: Was that like an anti-defense?

CTG: Yes, it was for defense. So, we came back and Ken said, 'Oh we haven't got much gas so we better pick out an air base and land.' We didn't have any air bases down southern part. We might have on the fighters but we didn't on the bombers. He dodged a barrage balloon and he picked out this air base and Jesus, he landed on it and it was a grass runway and he'd never even taken off on a grass runway and it wasn't too long either. Well, we landed there and the guy said, "Well, we'll fix it up. We'll fix it so you can go on home." So, then they said, "Why don't you go in and eat." Geez, we went in the cafeteria and they had stuff there, but they started separating the officers from the enlisted men. Ken said, "Why do you want those guys to go over there?" "Well, you can't eat with the enlisted men," or, "The enlisted men can't eat with you."

JC: This was the British telling you this?

CTG: Yes, air base. It was a sterling air base and Ken said, "You tell those guys that they eat with me and we're going in here." The English didn't like it because the pilot isn't rated like it would be in the United States.

JC: They don't have a high regard for the pilots?

CTG: They weren't first lieutenants. They were mostly sergeants as far as I could tell and they don't get paid anything, and here they are on pursuits.

They're flying all the English pursuits and they're flying sergeants. I mean our pilots in a pursuit in a B51 usually was a first lieutenant. At first, they were second but they got up fast. So, that's the way we ate that time. We went out and Ken took right off on that runway. God, those engines I thought they were going to shake right out of the wing. He had them revved up you know.

JC: Because of the short runway?

CTG: Yes. and he took off [makes a vertical movement with arm]. Ken was an excellent pilot. I mean we liked him very, very much.

JC: That's the gentlemen in the middle, right? [Holds up photo camera]

CTG: This is Ken right here. [Points at photo]

JC: He's still alive, you said?

CTG: Yes.

JC: Where did he learn his flying – when he joined?

CTG: Yes. I don't know where he went.

JC: He's got a bit of a swagger in this picture. He looks like a very confident man.

CTG: Oh yes, when we went up to see him a couple of years ago, Ann and I, we went up there and knocked on his door and I introduced Ann to him and he said, "Geez, you ain't a bad looking broad."

JC: Well he's correct.

CTG: He was really something.

JC: You had to be confident with him at the controls.

CTG: Oh yes. And, our co-pilot, he was as skilled as Ken, but he didn't have the hours in a B-24, but he finally got his own plane and crew and he finished up that way. He flew for United for quite a long time out in California.

JC: Well, I've enjoyed this, Charlie and I appreciate it. Is there anything else you want to add? Your memory's great, you have some excellent recollections and I've certainly learned a lot.

CTG: I know that two of my friends that we went to high school with here – one is dead but he was in the Navy flying the Navy B-24. No, he was in the Marines flying B-24's and a good friend of mine, he's dead, but the other guy, Les Mennell, he's down in Florida. But he was in the Navy flying the 24's--in the 24, he was a gunner.

JC: You guys have a lot to talk about?

CTG: Well I didn't see Ken. He stayed in California; he never came back. He ended up being deputy sheriff out there. The other one, Les, I stopped at his house one time in St. Petersburg. He didn't know who I was. His wife didn't either. She said, "There's somebody out here who wants to see you." When Les came, it finally dawned on him who I was. But I hadn't seen him in years. Well, I had a lot of fun in my life. At 63, I learned to square dance and at 64 I started calling square dancing, and I taught at clubs for sixteen years and we put up with this Jessup. We put on dances for the new dancers up at Carpenter Hayloft and I had a club up in Watkins and I had a club down in Binghamton. I'd do those all night and work all day. I had a lot of fun.

JC: So, you've always been a high energy guy?

CTG: I thought I was. They've taken a lot out of me in the last couple of years.

JC: Well your health seems good, Charlie.

CTG: It is now. Pretty good. I had prostate cancer and I had radiation and hormone shots but then the last time I saw the doctor he told me I had a clean bill of health so what's the difference?

JC: This has been very...