

Angelo Staffo
Veteran

Mohawk Regional Teachers Center
Hector Allen - Interviewer

Little Falls, New York
November 1, 1986

Hector Allen: HA
Angelo Staffo: AS

HA: To chronicle the experiences of the Little Falls area people in World War II I'd like to welcome tonight our first interviewer Angelo Staffo. Mr. Staffo did you volunteer?

AS: No, I was drafted January 2, 1943.

HA: Did you go through Albany or Syracuse?

AS: I went through Utica to Camp Upton which was on Long Island.

HA: Did you go with a big group of people?

AS: Yes, a large group of sixty people.

HA: In 1943 they were taking a lot of people. You probably didn't stay at Camp Upton very long.

AS: Just long enough to get our clothing, shots and so forth. Then I was shipped out to Miami Beach, Florida for basic training.

HA: Miami Beach that was easy to take. We had some people the first night that took basic training in Atlantic City, so a lot of people maybe would envy that today. Although I don't know. You went by train?

AS: Yes.

HA: It probably took more than one day to get to Miami.

AS: Yes, just about a day at that time. From Miami I went to Fort Myers, Florida for gunnery school.

HA: How many weeks is basic training?

AS: Approximately six weeks,

HA: During the six weeks you did the usual things, firing rifles, marching, learning drills and shooting pistols.

AS: Yes stuff like that.

HA: This was the Air Force right?

AS: Yes.

HA: In those days they used to draft people into the Air Force. They haven't done that in quite a while. Then you went to Fort Myers for gunnery school. What kind of weapons did you learn to fire?

AS: Thirty and fifty caliber machine guns.

HA: Were these in a bomber?

AS: Some were in bombers and some in single engine aircraft firing at fixed ground targets and things of that nature.

HA: These were twin fifties or just singles?

AS: In the bombers twin fifties. Single engines would use single thirties.

HA: How long was gunnery school?

AS: Approximately two and a half months,

HA: Then you went from Fort Myers to Denver, Colorado.

AS: Yes, and then I went to Buckley Field for a couple of weeks. Next to Lowry Field for armament school.

HA: Pick up any promotions along the way?

AS: Not that soon. But shortly after armament school I was made a sergeant.

HA: You got a lot of training overall, probably several months in a short period of time.

AS: Yes.

HA: Then when you finished armament school you went to Shreveport, Louisiana.

AS: Yes, I joined a bomber group for training on the bombers we were going to fly overseas.

HA: Which ones?

AS: I was assigned to a B-26 Marauder twin-engine bomber.

HA: I was just a kid during World War II, but I remember all the silhouettes they used to put up and we were ready to identify anything that came by, but they hardly ever did around here. Did you get any leaves or anything like that?

AS: I did get a leave just prior to going overseas. The only reason I got the leave is because my radio man dislocated his shoulder and we were held over for a couple of weeks. Most of my crew went to Italy, but because of the delay with my radio man I went to London.

HA: They formed a crew here in Shreveport.

AS: Yes they did.

HA: Did you go overseas by plane or by boat?

AS: I went by boat. My pilot, co-pilot and radio man flew a plane over. They went to Georgia and picked up the plane and went over from there. The rest of us went into New York and went over on the Britannic.

HA: That was a big, rather prominent British liner. That ship was fast enough so if you weren't in a convoy the ship could outrun enemy submarines.

AS: Yes, we didn't have any escorts whatsoever.

HA: I think it must have gotten a little scary sleeping down below three decks in the thin hide of that ship.

AS: We had three tiered bunks so one guy would have to signal when he wanted to roll over or climb out.

HA: The North Atlantic gets pretty rough, especially in the wintertime, so I suppose the usual number of people got sea sick?

AS: Yes, but fortunately it never bothered me so I didn't get sick.

HA: When you arrived in England did you dock at Liverpool?

AS: No, we landed in Scotland and went on to a training base in Northern Ireland. At this base I joined my regular group and we received more overseas training.

HA: Would the regular group operate out of England?

AS: Yes, we were maybe an hour outside of London.

HA: Now this must have been pretty close to D-Day?

AS: No, I flew thirty five and a half missions before D-Day.

HA: Then you were stationed in England on the coast reasonably close?

AS: Yes, I was in Great Dunmow. We flew medium bombers so we didn't have the range of the B-17 and B-24 bombers.

HA: Your targets were probably railroads and things like that?

AS: We targeted railroads, bridges and we hit rocket bomb sights in St. Mary, France.

HA: Earlier you said you flew thirty five and a half missions so, how can you fly half a mission?

AS: I was shot down over France during the thirty sixth mission.

HA: So, then you became a prisoner?

AS: No, the French Underground took us under their wing and we evaded capture. I remained with them for approximately three and a half months.

HA: Did a German fighter or anti- aircraft shoot you down?

AS: I say shot down but actually at that time we were trying a new method of bombing and one of the flights came over us and dropped a two thousand pound bomb on our left wing. It sheared off most of the left wing and left engine. We were at about eleven thousand feet and dropped to about five thousand when the pilot gave the signal to bail out.

HA: Was this the first time you had to jump out of a plane?

AS: No, another time we were partially disabled and had to lighten up the load on the ship so we bailed out over an English airbase.

HA: Did everybody make it down?

AS: My co-pilot's parachute didn't open and he was killed, but my radio man and I escaped and were picked up by the French underground. The others were taken as prisoners.

HA: Did the Germans ever come close to finding you?

AS: Yes, one place we stayed at was a farm house and while we were eating in the kitchen the Germans came to the door to buy fresh produce, but we were okay. We would raid the German ammunition dumps for bombs, guns and whatever we could get and load them up in the church. I imagine after we left the French underground used them.

HA: Were the French people living under the heel of the Germans and having a tough time?

AS: In the section where I was they didn't seem to be all that bad, the Germans paid for whatever they took and didn't hassle the people in any way. This is the way it was when I was there and I don't know what happened later.

HA: Did you get out before D-Day?

AS: No. We were supposed to go to another section and they were to get us out through the Pyrenees going to Spain, but we never made it. The plan was called off because D-Day was coming and so we stayed in a parish house at a church until British troops came through. We were flown back to England a week later.

HA: Did they put you back to work?

AS: No, we weren't able to go back to flying again and we were shipped home.

HA: That was a reasonably good break after all you'd been through and you certainly had some interesting experiences. I bet you learned to speak a bit of French?

AS: Very little, we were taught some French before we went over, just simple things like, I'm an American and can you help me. Where we were hiding the husband and wife had been in the United States for about nine years. She was a cook for wealthy people on the island and her husband was a handyman. They could speak reasonably good English, enough to make you understand.

HA: Did you ever worry that some of the neighbors might turn you in for favors from the Germans?

AS: Not really because they were all related one way or another to the people we were staying with and most of them were in the French underground.

HA: I remember seeing pictures, after the invasion and France was liberated, of some of the women who collaborated with the Germans having all their hair shaved off and they were treated quite badly.

AS: We went to a small village maybe two days after we were liberated and saw them shaving the heads of collaborators, stripping them and throwing things at them.

HA: Wow, there was a lot of emotion raised. Did the Germans ever come through and take hostages because of underground or partisan activity?

AS: Not where we were at.

HA: I understood they would take ten people at random and shoot them if there had been any sabotaged rail lines.

AS: Maybe in different areas not where we were, nothing of that nature happened.

HA: Do you ever correspond with anyone?

AS: I used to but all the people are quite elderly and they passed away a good many years now.

HA: Two years ago was the anniversary of D-Day and a number of American veterans went back over and you didn't. I was wondering why?

AS: I was there before D-Day so I didn't.

HA: Oh, you had gone before?

AS: I was shot down in France on May 30th and D-Day was June 6th, so I was already over there.

HA: It's my understating that our Air Force did a very effective job on the German rail lines.

AS: They did with the heavies, B-17 and B-24 bombers and the British really did a terrific job more inland than us. Our primary job, just before D-Day, was to knock down the bridges on the River (unclear) so they wouldn't be able to bring reinforcements over quickly.

HA: You said your plane was hit by a two thousand pound bomb. What plane dropped the bomb, a B-24?

AS: No, a B-26, one of our own.

HA: They could carry one of those?

AS: We carried two, two thousand pounders. They just miscalculated and dropped it and that was it.

HA: I imagine a lot of people got hit by friendly fire and there was nothing you could do about that. So, then you got home and did you get discharged or did you have to stay in service.

AS: I stayed in and went back to Denver, then down to Sheppard Field, Texas and next up to Rome. I was in Rome three or four months and got discharged in September 1945.

HA: What was your rank when you left?

AS: Staff Sargent.

HA: When you came home in September that was about the time of VJ Day and there must have been big celebrations?

AS: Yes, VJ Day was just right after I arrived in Rome and I got discharged shortly after that.

HA: Most of the people I interviewed didn't get back till well after VJ Day. Do you remember what you were doing on VJ Day?

AS: I was stationed in Rome and I called my girlfriend and told her I was coming down, so I hitched a ride and went out for the night. The community had something later on but I wasn't involved in that.

HA: I recall every community used to have an honor roll remembering those who died. I think one was over by Eastern Park. Also, I remember the one at St. Johns, it was on the lawn of the Methodist church and was made out of wood,

AS: Yes, and they had one by City Hall and I think it is still there.

HA: Did you have a job before you went into service?

AS: I had a job at (unclear).

HA: They had to hold the job for you that was the law. So you went back to Chicago Pneumatic?

AS: No, I was working at the fibers company at that time. Chicago Pneumatic wasn't here they were still in Cleveland and Detroit.

HA: National Auto Fibers I remember them they made upholstery parts for Chrysler and GM. Did you ever take advantage of the GI Bill?

AS: I was going to but decided it wasn't for me and when Chicago Pneumatic came into the area I went to work for them. I worked there for thirty years.

HA: Do you ever keep in touch with any of the guys you knew?

AS: I used to until maybe five years ago. We would send a card at Christmas with a resume of what happened during the year, but that's about it. Slowly, but surely, the cards stopped coming.

HA: That's one of the reasons were doing this show because there are a lot of World War II veterans left and they'll be around for a long while, but slowly they will not.

AS: As for myself, there were four of us in the service. I had one brother in the Navy, one in the twenty seventh division, he was fighting the Japanese and one brother was flying out of North Africa and was shot down and killed flying over Greece.

HA: What kind of aircraft was he flying?

AS: He was flying in a B-17 and was a bombardier.

HA: I don't know myself how many people from Little Falls died in the war.

AS: I believe quite a few for a small town.

HA: I would estimate eight or nine hundred totally served and probably fifty or sixty were killed, but I don't know for sure. Well thank you very much for coming in to talk with us and record this for history.