

**George T. Fitzgibbon
Veteran**

**Interviewed by:
Wayne Clarke, Mike Russert
New York State Military Museum**

**At Johnson City, NY
18 May 2004**

Q: Would you please state our date of birth and place of birth

GF: I was born in Staten Island, NY on October 23, 1921.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering the service?

GF: I was trying to get enough credits to get into the Army Air force flying cadet program. That was my foal all along. I had just about completed half the credits required for a degree which I needed when Pearl Harbor was attacked. The next day I was at Baer Field near Fort Wayne (IN) applying for my cadet training. I was accepted and went into the Army Air Corps program.

Q: Where were you and what was your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

GF: I was in a restaurant called the Hobby House in Fort Wayne, having a hamburger, when it was announced over the speaker system. My first question was "where was Pearl Harbor?". A Navy guy lived in our house, so he enlightened me as to Pearl Harbor. We got to talking about it and that this was going to be serious business. I used it as a catalyst to get into the flying program.

Q: So, you enlisted?

GF: Yes, I enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

Q: Why did you want to be in the Army Air Corps?

GF: Flying had appealed to me since I was 15 or so. I didn't have any experience except riding in the back seat of an old open cockpit plane a couple times. I read a lot about it and decided that was what I wanted to do. This provided me with the means to do it.

Q: Where did you go for your training?

GF: I went down to Maxwell Air Base in Alabama. After basic training there I went to primary flying school at Decatur, AL.

Q: What type of aircraft did you fly there?

GF: It was a PT-17.

Q: That was a Stearman biplane?

GF: Yes, it was. Then I went to Greenville, MS for training. That was in a PT-13, and then back to Selma, AL for advanced in a North American AT-6. The last ten hours was in a WW-II fighter. They had three different types. They had a P-36, a P-39 and a P-40. You drew to see which one you were going to get, and I drew the old P-36. So I flew my last ten hours of flying school in a P-36.

Q: What did you think of that airplane?

GF: Well, it was the most sophisticated thing I had flown so far, so I thought a lot of it. It was not as good as the P-40 I didn't think, but I got ten hours in it and it helped me a lot. I graduated and

proceeded from there. I was assigned to Pinellas County airport in Florida, where we had P-40's. I flew P-40's down there for a couple months.

Q: You were commissioned by then?

GF: Yes, I was commissioned. Then I got shipping instructions, and then transportation to NY City, then a boat over to England.

Q: Were you in a convoy or single?

GF: We were on the Queen Elizabeth and unescorted except for the first 500 miles. They went fast and changed course every three minutes. That was their evasive action. We didn't have any problems. It was kind of a rough weather trip. It took about five days. We ended up in Glasgow, Scotland. Then we were assigned to a little airfield in northern England called Shaftsbury.

Q: When did you arrive in Scotland?

GF: That was about the 24th of November in 1942. The trouble with Shaftsbury was that it was a nice little military base, but didn't have an airfield. We were about a dozen replacement pilots. They also had no P-40's in England, which we were all prepared in. So, we hang around there and played cards and went to the pubs and stuff for a couple months and then they asked for five volunteers to go down to North Africa. That was all they could tell us about it. I volunteered because I didn't like what we were doing there.

We sailed in a convoy this time, down to North Africa. I think one of our ships got torpedoed. All we saw was the smoke. We came down and through the Straits of Gibraltar and into a nice calm Mediterranean Sea. I thought it was a heavenly place for submarines, but we didn't have any problem. We went into Oran. We stayed overnight there and then they flew us to Casablanca. Then we went to a pasture type airfield about twenty miles outside of Casablanca. We had trainers there that we flew for a while. Then we heard they were bringing P-38's into Casablanca by ship. They were partially disassembled and they were assembling them right there in Casablanca at the airport. So, we got checked out in the P-38, the five of us. They used us to fly the airplanes up to the front. We did that for four or five trips. Then we got orders to stay up there. We joined the 8th's 2nd Fighter Group.

Q: What did you think of the P-38?

GF: Wonderful! It was a dream machine. The only disadvantage was that it was slow to roll. If you were attempting a tight turn to evade the enemy it took a little more time to get into that position than you wanted it to, where with a single-engine fighter you just whip that stick over and you were right up there. Anyway, it never adversely affected us. We were assigned to the 96th Fighter Squadron and we started flying missions right away. We were flying out of Telergma. We would fly out over the Mediterranean and sometimes escort bombers to Sardinia, sometimes Sicily and other islands. Sometimes we would go out on what were called ship sweeps. We could fire on any ships we saw in the Mediterranean. That was a pretty good way of doing things because you didn't have to worry about identifying the enemy. Anything you see out there was the enemy, so we would strafe boats and ships and drop bombs on them.

Q: Did they return fire?

GF: Oh yes. You dive down to strafe a ship and it looked like all those tracers were coming right between your eyes.

Q: What size bombe did you carry?

GF: We carried one 500 lb bomb on one side and a fuel tank on the other side for equalization. The thing was, you couldn't drop your empty fuel tank without dropping your bomb, so we would wait and drop both of them at the same time. We didn't have a bomb sight, so we would dive down on them and hope we were somewhere in the ballpark.

Q: Did you get bounced by enemy fighters at all?

GF: Yes, when we got around Sicily especially. Both Italian fighters and Focke-Wulf 190 German fighters. I shot down an Italian Macchi C202 fighter that I got credit for. Then, on my 25th mission I was over Sicily. It was the day we invaded Sicily. Fighters based in western Sicily were flying down and strafing our troops. Then they would come back to refuel and we would go after them then. We got into a big dog fight there and I got a Focke-Wulf 190 in my sights and I was shooting everything I had. Parts were coming off. Part of his cowling came off and my world came to an end. Something hit me and my left engine was on fire. Black smoke came through the wing root and up into the cockpit. All of a sudden I couldn't see a thing. I could only see the sky above me.

Q: Do you think it was part of the other plane that hit you?

GF: I don't know. We've been trying to figure that out for years. We were flying only about 200 feet off the ground and I could see fire coming up. They checked that out after the war and nobody in Sicily reported shooting down a P-38 that day. I think it was ground fire, but anyway, it doesn't make much difference. With the smoke there wasn't much I could do but get out of the thing. I pulled her up and raised the canopy, unhooked my seat belt, and rolled it over, pushed on the wheel, and fell out.

Q: How high would you say you were?

GF: I'd say about 800 feet. I was wearing a seat pack and the seat pack caught on a hinge. So I was hanging there out of the airplane. I couldn't do anything but kick my feet a little bit, which I did and pretty soon it broke loose. Then I watched the airplane go by and then pulled the rip cord. I pulled it and nothing happened, so I pulled harder and that did it.

So, I landed in the Mediterranean Sea about 200 yards off shore.

Q: Were you wearing a life jacket or anything?

GF: Oh yes, I had a rubber boat in my sea pack and I had a mae west on. But the water was only up to my chest and I was 200 yards off shore. It was like a spit out there. As it came out from shore it got deeper and then rose up again. I didn't have much time to look around while I was coming down. It happened too fast. You are supposed to unhook your harness before you land but I didn't have enough time. I unhooked two but not the third one. I hit bottom right away and then was able to unhook the harness. I was still attached to the rubber boat. I came up and stood on the bottom and looked around. I looked at the shore and there were three guys in there waiving at me to come in. They fired a couple shots on each side of me to get my attention I guess. Anyway, I walked in.

Q: Were you carrying any side arms?

GF: Yes, I had a 45 on my hip. I took it out and laid in on the bottom of the sea and walked in. The guy said that for me the war was over. He was pretty nearly right. There was a lot of war yet to come.

Q: Was he German?

GF: No, he was Italian military. Then we walked into the village of Castelvetro. We went to a

place that was like an officers' club. It was about 7: 00 in the evening. It was full of guys with drinks in their hands and I guess it was the commanding officer that they took me to. Nobody tried to speak with me or anything. He had them take me down the street and they put me up on the second floor of this building right in the middle of the village. They left a guard there with me. About an hour later a guy came down from up that way with a dinner for me. It was Salisbury steak, maybe spinach, a little spaghetti, and a little wine. I thought that if I had known about the food I would have come sooner. We had been eating c-rations up until then. I was there maybe a couple nights and then was loaded on a bus and we drove up to Palermo.

Q: Were there any other GI's on the bus?

GF: No, not at this point. There were five guards and me, including the driver. We went to Palermo and to the operations building at the airport. I was on the second floor with one guard. That night I had to go to the restroom and the guard was sitting on the bed, leaning on his rifle and dozing. I told him where I was going and I went. There were window openings but no glass. So, I jumped out the window onto a landing down there. I took off about 2: 00 in the morning. Nobody saw me and I walked what I guess would have been west for half a mile or so and up through the city. There were no people around. Everybody was sleeping. I went another three miles or so and was thinking it was going to get light soon and I needed to find a place to stay during the daytime. Before I could decide on exactly what to do, I walked right into an Italian gun position. They were covering the road coming up from the south. The next thing I knew, I heard a gun clicking. A big searchlight comes on and I put my hands up. So, I was captured again. Fortunately, they didn't shoot. They sure had the drop on me that time. I was so close. General Patton's army came through there two or three days later. Montgomery went up the east coast and Patton came around. So, back to being a POW again. Then we were taken on a bus to Messina. Messina had just been attacked and they were still in the war there. There were a couple bodies laying out on the street. They were civilians. By now there were 5 or 6 of us and they loaded us into a launch and took us across the Straits of Messina.

Q: Were the other POW's American?

GF: Yes

Q: Were they all fliers?

GF: Yes, all pilots. The P-51 was originally a P-36 that had dive brakes on it and they used it for dive bombing. A couple of the guys were from those. There were airplanes all over the place. I was worried that we were going to get strafed out in the middle of the Straits. We made it across. Then we walked. We did a lot of walking as POW's. We got to a railroad and they loaded us into a couple boxcars. By now there were 66 of us. We must have joined some that were already there. They put 33 of in each boxcar and we took off. We got up south of Salerno and the Salerno marshalling yards were all bombed out. They pulled us off on a siding. They unhooked the engine and they went their own way. We sat there for seven days, I think. The 4th day they came around with a big kettle of some kind of brothy soup. It wasn't very good but tasted like heaven at the time.

Q: This was the first meal you had?

GF: I had eaten back where we were previously so I did pretty good. I'd say they did pretty good when they could, but once we got up there on the siding, the guards just sat out there and laughed and had a good time talking. They had their own provisions. Nobody seemed to be putting any effort into getting us something to eat. Then, the Germans evidently heard that we were there and they came down with three lorries. They loaded us into the trucks and took us around Salerno and

up to a camp at a place called Capua, just northeast of Naples. It was just a barbed wire camp and we stayed in there a week or two.

Q: There were other prisoners in there?

GF: Oh yes. Now we were getting all together. We must have had several hundred now. Some of them were ground troops now. About a quarter mile from us was this brick factory. It turned out to be a small arms factory. One day B-25's came over and bombed that thing. That thing blew up for about 12 hours. Boxcars blew up and just when you thought it was the last one, another one would blow up. They had masonry ceilings in our buildings and a lot of it came down and cut up a lot of our guys.

Q: Did they keep the officers separate from the enlisted men?

GF: Not at that point. At that point we were all together. Eventually, when we got settled they separated them, definitely. Especially, the Germans did that. I'm not so sure about the Italians. We were prisoners of the Italians for about three months. We left that camp and went up to a place called Altamura east of Rome. It was a civilian prison and had big 15-foot masonry walls. It made thoughts of escape very difficult. Italian guards would be walking the top of that wall, until one day in September they were gone and German guard troopers were up there. That was how we found out that Italy had capitulated. So, a couple weeks later they marched us down to the railroad, put us in boxcars, and we went up north. We stopped several times along the way. They would stop for a couple hours out in the open. They wouldn't let us out of the cars. Finally, we got to Bolzano up in the Alps, at the Brenner Pass. We arrived there about 12:00 noon. We could hear the bombers almost before the train stopped. It turned out that their target was a railroad bridge on the south side of Bolzano at the yards. They bombed that and destroyed it, and scared the hell out of all of us. Somebody ran up and down opening the doors on all of the boxcars. Not the Germans. POWs did this. You had a choice. Everyone was running like crazy, so do I go right or left? So, I went left into the city of Bolzano. Going right there were open some open lots and then the river was out there. I might have had a better chance if I had gone toward the river. I could swim well. Anyway, I went left and had another fellow with me. People were all in bomb shelters, so nobody was out except for a German guard here and there to keep us contained a little bit. We saw this guard ahead in the middle of the street, so we zipped into a building and went up the stairs. Everybody else was in the basement so went up and got on top and went over to another building or two. We got on the far side of this guard and then we walked up the street. We walked for maybe half a mile in the city. The third wave of bombers was over and people were coming out of the shelters. The streets were getting full of people. We said "what do we do now?". We looked like Americans right off the bat. We pulled into one of these estate-like places, like an acre of property with a lot of shrubs and hedges around. We pulled into one and got behind the hedges. We were sitting in there, thinking we would wait until dark and then get out of there. A German guy comes out there with a Luger and told us to come in the house. So, somebody had seen us go in there. So, we were recaptured and returned back to the rest of the troops. We were back on the same train and went north through the Brenner Pass to Munich. Then we walked up to Moosburg. Moosburg was a big barbed wire camp. I don't know how many were in there at that time. Later I was back at Moosburg again and at the time there were about 30,000 of us. Anyway, we stayed there a couple weeks. Then we were back on the train again and we went north all the way to Sagan. It was about 90 kilometers southeast of Berlin, on the Oder River. That was where Stalag III was. We moved in there and stayed there for a year and a half. That is where the "great escape" was. We were in the

South Compound. That was just over the fence in the North Compound. We couldn't see any of this. We didn't even know what was going on.

We had tunnel projects of our own. In fact, we had three going out of our barracks. We were in Barracks 55 and we were in a corner. We were fairly close to the fence. You had to tunnel a long way through sandy ground. That is where all of our bed slats went, to hold up the sand from collapsing. We developed a system after a while. The Germans would know that you had tunneling going on. They would wait a while and then they would come in all of a sudden and search. So, we had two tunnels that we called diversionary tunnels. They were the ones that were supposed to be found by the Germans. The other one was the main event and hopefully they wouldn't find that one. They did find it in our case. But it gave us something to do.

Q: How did you conceal the tunnels?

GF: It was the same as that in "Stalag 17". They had a little potbelly stove and so did we. We did a little carpenter work under it. We made it so the stove would sit there but we could take the whole thing down in a flash. We would pull the stove over and open a panel. We would go down about ten feet and there was the tunnel. Anyway, it kept everybody busy. If you did nothing else, you carried sand around in your pockets and unloaded the sand somewhere. We would dump it around shrubs and such. The tunnel sand was white and the surface sand was brown, so it was hard to conceal. They knew we were doing it the whole time. Eventually we went to the out house and dumped the sand down the hole. So, we played bridge all winter and played softball all summer.

Q: Did you get any Red Cross packages?

GF: Yes, absolutely. If it wasn't for the Red Cross we would have been in dire straits. The Germans gave everybody a bowl of soup on Thursday. You would maybe get a potato or two per person the rest of the week. About every six weeks they would give you the reddest, most luscious piece of steak you ever saw, but it was horse meat. It was so tough you could hardly eat it. You could take a little bite of that and chew it for an hour, which we did.

Q: Was it cooked?

GF: No, we had to cook it. It was so pretty because it was red just like in a butcher's case. Anyway, each person was supposed to get one Red Cross parcel each week. We were getting one parcel for 6 or 7 guys for the first year or so. Later, as the war began to wind down, with our forces being on the continent, things started picking up a little bit. I think they started to worry about Who was going to get blamed for mistreatment. The camp commander wasn't any dummy. He was going to protect his ass. We ended up getting one parcel per four people the last 3 or 4 months. That was good. There was some sugar and a can of Spam, some cocoa, etc. Those were great things. Oh, and we'd get bread! That was the main thing the Germans gave us. It was a small pumpernickel loaf. We heard on the German news broadcast that the sawdust content had been reduced to ten percent. We wondered what it was before that. It was sliced thin at about one eighth of an inch. You could hold it on the edge and it wouldn't even bend. It was good stuff. I was a great bread eater all my life so that was great. We got one eleventh of a loaf of bread per person per day. For breakfast you would get a piece of bread with some margarine on it. Margarine came in the Red Cross packages. The Red Cross really saved us.

Q: Who did you have as Guards? Did you have older men as guards?

GF: Most of the guards were older. Most of them had come from the Russian front. They had been

wounded. A couple of them were a little bit crippled from their wounds. They had a limp or an arm they couldn't straighten out. They were older guys and we got along well with them. We didn't do anything to antagonize them. They were hoping the war would be over soon, the same as we were.

Q: Were your parents at home aware that you were a prisoner? Were you able to communicate with them at all?

GF: Yes, my mother received notification that I was a POW about 2-3 months after I was captured. My brother was in the 1st Armored Division. They came through our area there in North Africa when they were going back to a rest camp after Tunisia fell. He met some of the guys in my squadron. Later, he ran into one of the same guys, probably at a rest camp too. The guy told my brother that I had been shot down and that they saw me bail out and thought that I was alright. So, he wrote my mother. She was ok until she got that telegram, so it was a good way to break the ice.

Q: How often did you get mail from home?

GF: I don't think she was restricted in how often she could write to me and I wasn't restricted either. I wrote about once a week to her and to a girlfriend. She was restricted on things she could send to me. She could send a little box about every sixty days. After we got communicating, which took about six months of back and forth, she sent me long underwear and socks.

Q: You received all of these things?

GF: Yes, as far as I know I did. The box would be opened and they would go through everything. I ended up with two sets of long winter underwear. When we marched out of that camp I had both sets on. It was January, with six inches of snow.

Q: When you marched out of that camp, where did you go?

GF: We marched south, to a little village called Cotvus. It was about 45 or 50 miles. It took us five days to get there. There were 10,000 of us. The winter conditions didn't help any. The first night out was pretty wicked. You are all spread out with 10,000 guys. Some guys probably had good accommodations. Our group ended up in a stable. We slept on a concrete floor. The stable didn't have any windows or doors. The wind whistled through there. We each had one blanket. A fellow from Wisconsin and I bunked together, with one blanket on the bottom and one on top. It was a miserable night. We walked all day the next day and ended up on the second floor of a factory. The heat was pouring up from that place. It almost choked out, it was so hot. It was from one extreme to another.

Q: Did any American planes fly over when you guys were marching?

GF: We did see a couple B-17's when we were still in the stalag. That was the only time we saw any American planes. We were in eastern Germany, bordering Poland.

Q: Were you ever aware of what was going on at the fronts?

GF: Yes, they had speakers in the camp and we would get a German news broadcast every afternoon. That was slanted of course and you didn't always get the truth from them. I remember when Cassino fell it took them about 4 days to say anything about the Cassino battle. They never did say they lost it. They said they moved back to a better defensive position during the night. We got some BBC broadcasts. Some ingenious Englishman there had built some sort of radio. He kept it hidden. Nobody knew where it was. Nobody in our camp knew where it was. He would copy that down every morning and pass it around on a piece of paper. It traveled from one compound to another. A guy would come in with a piece of paper to brief everybody in the barracks, after we had

posted guards to make sure there were no Germans around. We would get the BBC news within 24 hours. So, we knew when the invasion came and the hi-lights.

Q: We have heard from other POW's about the Germans trying to recruit them to join in the fight against the Russians. Did you know of any of that going on?

GF: I don't think so. If they did, I don't remember that.

Q: So, you ended up heading back to Moosburg?

GF: Yes. Colonel Spivey was our camp commander. He was a wonderful gentleman. I'm sure he did a lot of things that I wasn't aware of, but he also did a lot of things for which we owe him. I can't think of anything specific, but he was protecting us all of the time. He was often fighting with the German commandant, and the fighting got easier as the war progressed. Anyway, we got on the train and got into Leipzig right before midnight. We just got in there and the air raid sirens went off. We didn't have to wait long and then the train pulled out. What did happen, we had about 2,000 guys and the Germans had served us what they called soup. We hadn't had any solid food. I had a bit of bread and cheese that I was rationing to myself. We were hungry and everybody ate the soup. We got into Leipzig and everybody had to go to the bathroom. We took a look around at women and kids. There were no men, just the guards. So, one of the sights of the war was watching 2,000 men going to the bathroom right out there in the open. I guess with all those people watching we had no choice. Then we left Leipzig and went on down to Munich, and walked back to Moosburg, and spent the rest of the war there. There were about 30,000 there then. A lot of them were like Hungarians and Greeks, Romanians, and other people from that part of Europe.

Q: Were they military or political prisoners?

GF: I think they were both. I know we had some civilians. We were trying to separate a bit from them, but not completely. We would walk around for exercise. I got to be a good walker. That's what I did at the stalag. I'd walk around the compound I don't know how many times. It was 1,000 yards around. I got my legs into shape and that helped me when we walked out of there. So, I was walking around with a friend one morning. It was the 28th of April. We could look up on the hill and see something coming out of the woods. It turned out to be a Sherman tank. We had heard it on the radio that General Patton's 3rd Army had got to Nuremburg and elements of his army had turned south. Sure enough, here came some of his army. Soon there were six tanks up there. Then small arms fire started right in the woods next to them. We didn't even know somebody was out there. There was all of this machine gun fire. We all piled into this trench that we had and tried to watch the war. The village of Moosburg had a couple church steeples and some Hitler youth were up there with machine guns. So, those tanks blew those churches right down.

Q: Were the guards still in the camp?

GF: Yes, at this point they were exiting. I think a couple guards got hit by gunfire, but all the rest of them were gone. We never saw another German. This all started about 9:30 in the morning and about 12:30 Sherman tanks came rolling right into the camp. They got a tremendous welcome. Then they put our own military police around the camp so nobody could get out. That was reasonable, as they didn't want to turn 30,000 people loose out on the roads. We were right behind the front that they had barely gone through. This guy, Red Hanson, from Ohio said let's get out of here. I thought "I'm with you", so we went out under the fence that night with our own guards on the fences. We figured that if they saw us they wouldn't shoot. Nobody saw us so it went pretty smooth. It took us about two days to get to Nuremburg. It was probably about a hundred miles or so. We hitchhiked in American jeeps and stuff. We had to prove ourselves each time. We

looked like hell. I had an Eisenhower jacket on and British long pants and some kind of an English woolen hat. We had no insignia of any kind. We had no dog tags, as they were all gone.

Q: Did you have any kind of ID at all?

GF: Nothing at all. The first guy that stopped had his pistol right out there. He asked us a lot of questions, about the Brooklyn Dodgers, etc. We would finally convince them that we were Americans and they would give us a ride up the road. Then we would have to go through all of that again. It took us two days to get to Nuremburg. We went to the wrong airfield first. Then to the right airfield, where there were C-47's bringing in 50-gallon drums of gasoline. We convinced the Operations Office that we were Americans even though we looked like bums. He gave us a tent to sleep in. We got on a C-47 the next day and flew back to Lahar (sp?). We got to Lahar and were met by some Red Cross ladies, who hugged us even though we looked so bad. We went to Camp Lucky Strike. We must have been the first to go through there, or else there was a lull in operations, because there must have been a thousand tents out there and only about half a dozen were occupied. Anyway, we showered, and man, that was great. Something as simple as a shower is great when you don't have any. Then they deloused us. A guy came around with what looked like a flame thrower on his back and a big hose. He blew us in places where we didn't know we had places. Then they issued us new clothes. Then they put us on five meals a day, with very restricted quantities. That was ok, because we probably would have ruptured ourselves on mashed potatoes and gravy, etc. I was only there three days maybe when they announced they had some openings on a ship going back in a convoy going to Boston. So, I got on a troop ship. I can't remember the name. We were not on five meals a day anymore and boy did I eat. I think I gained 20 pounds on that trip. Actually, all the other ships went to New York and my ship went to Boston. It didn't make any difference. Then we took a train to Fort Devon and stayed overnight there. The next day we took a train to New York City, and out to Fort Dix, where I was processed out. I wasn't forced out. I could have stayed in if I had wanted to. I elected to get out. I got transportation back to Manhattan, where my mother was living at that time. I had a big rendezvous with the family. She had my foot locker there with all of my uniform clothes in it. I had everything except a tie. So, I put my uniform on and we all went down to this restaurant in Greenwich Village and had dinner.

My train pulled into Penn Station before my mother could get everyone there. I headed to the nearest barber shop where I had a shave, shampoo and a haircut. I was treated like a hero. I went to my mother's apartment. Soon she arrived, followed by my aunt Lill and Uncle Fred, my cousins Bob and Shirley. For George Fitzgibbon the war was over.

Q: How were the Jewish POW's treated? Were they treated any differently that you knew of?

GF: Not that I knew of. We had Jewish men right in our group. Of course, nobody broadcast that.

Q: Were you aware of the concentration camps?

GF: I'm not sure when I first became aware of them. I think it was after the war. I visited one near Furstenfeldbruck, north of the Alps in Bavaria. It might have been Dachau, but I don't know. In the 1950's I was based in England and I flew down to Munich quite a few times. I got a tour of this camp eleven or twelve years after the fact. The ovens were still there. I guess they left it for display purposes to show people what happened there. I remember when it happened Eisenhower got all of these civilians from the local city and made them view them all, so they knew what was going on only a mile from where they lived.

Q: So, how did you get back in the service?

GF: I was a reserve officer, so I did a bit of this and that. I was actually going to Cornell when I was recalled during the Korean War. They needed Pilots. I had gotten married in the meantime. We talked it over, as I probably could have gotten out of it. My wife and I sat down and talked about it. She had been in the service a year herself. They made her an MP when she should have been in Special Services. She was a great piano player. Every night she would be down at the USO playing the piano. So, when she finished training, they sent her to MP school. We couldn't get over it. So, she finished MP school and went to Fort Devens, Mass. Then she applied to get out. They missed a good body right there. She liked the community life, etc. of the service, associating with people of the same age group and such. So, we went back and spent fifteen more years in the service.

Q: She went back in too?

GF: No, she was a dependent. She enjoyed it more so than I did, probably. But I enjoyed it too.

Q: What kind of aircraft did you fly?

GF: I went to basic instructor school. There I flew a T-28 and a T-33. Then I went to Bryan, TX where I instructed students in a basic flying program. After a couple years of that I was transferred to England. I had gone to F-86D training in Sherman, TX. We were there for five months before going to England. I flew over there for a couple years, and then they were going to transfer our base to France. I had less than a year to go, so they wouldn't transfer me. They shipped me back to the U.S. instead. Then I was assigned to KC-135's. They just pulled my name out of a hat. They needed bodies, so that is what I ended up in. I was in SAC for twelve years and finished up in KC-135's.

Q: You retired in 1969?

GF: Yes, I was a Lt. Colonel and Operations Officer of the 41st Air Refueling Squadron at Griffis. I got my degree when I was in the service. I took the squadron officers course by correspondence and a command staff course by correspondence. I was always taking courses and I think that helped me stay in the military, because I was always striving for something a little better. Then I applied for Operation Bootstrap at the University of Omaha when I was flying C-135's in Oklahoma. I was given a six-month leave of absence to go up there. I got my degree and then went back to tankers again. Then they came along with another program, the Minuteman Missile Program. That was an educational program to get your Masters degree. So, I applied for that program. I went to that school up at Minot, ND. There, I was a combat crewman for the missile program. I was flying support aircraft all the time.

Q: Did you work with the missile silos up there?

GF: Yes, the Minuteman missile silos. It got to be too much for me. I couldn't handle it all. The only thing I could drop was the educational program. If I continue and don't do well with my subjects, that will look worse on my record than it would if I just drop out. So, I dropped out. Then they took me off the combat crew stuff and made me a TAC officer for five silo crews. I did that for about a year. Then I heard that SAC headquarters was looking at putting me back into KC-135's. I called this guy at SAC headquarters and told him that, given a choice, Griffis air base would be my number one choice and Plattsburg number two. So, I got transferred to Griffis. There were about 2 1/2 years remaining before my retirement. I finished my tour there on KC-135's. So, end of story.

Q: So, it was 1969 when you got out then?

GF: Yes.

Q: Did you ever keep in contact with anyone that was in the service with you?

GF: Yes. I can think of three of them right off hand. One was near Columbus, OH, one in Waynesboro, PA, and the other in Pensicola Beach, FL. There were more, but these three were pretty close friends. One was a pilot and the other two were navigators. We were all involved in the same thing at SAC.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was a POW with you?

GF: That's a funny story. A fella we were with in Stalag III named Steve Souris. Of Greek descent, he was a prize fighter. He and Steven Zale were stable mates. They would spar together daily. Zale was about eight years older than he. He was a bombardier and got shot down over Germany. He was real physical specimen. He would place his hands the opposite way and do pull-ups on a beam in the outhouse. It made my neck ache just to think about it. It was amazing just to see him working out very day. He would work out for an hour every day. Then he would jog around the camp for 2 1/2 hours. He kept himself in training like he was preparing for a fight. He loved to escape. He escaped seven times. When we were marching out of Stalag III, I asked a guard what ever happened to him. He said "too many escapes and they shot him". So, I thought all those years that that was the end of Steve. Then we were at a parade in Florida in 1991. I read about the parade in the paper and there was an article about the VA. This guy from the VA had come down to St. Petersburg to interview these guys that had been complaining about their benefits. The primary guy that was complaining was this guy Steve. He was in Bradenton so I looked him up and called him and we have been in touch down there ever since.

Q: He is still alive?

GF: Yes, he is 86 and has congestive heart failure. He and his daughter meet us for lunch a couple times every winter down there. We eat where we sit on the second floor and she makes him use the elevator.

Q: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

GF: I belong to the American Legion.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

GF: It was regimented, which I didn't object to. I think it helped my life, having the path all lit up for you. I didn't want to be led around by the hand, but everybody needs some leadership. So, I think I got it from the military. I never resented anything about the military. It fit my program well. I enjoyed the education I got and I certainly enjoyed the aviation. After I got out of the military, I flew for sixteen years as a professional pilot. Most of that time I was a chief pilot for NYS Electric and Gas right here. They had a nice Beechcraft King Air with all the good stuff loaded on it. That was a terrific flying experience. When I was 64 my hearing started to go bad, so I had to give it up. So, I retired.