

Richard G. Alagna  
Narrator

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New York State Military Museum  
Interviewer

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MR: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please.

RA: Richard Gregory Alagna, I was born November 16, 1925. I was born in Brooklyn, NY, at the Brooklyn Hospital.

MR: Could you tell me your pre-war education.

RA: I graduated from high school and I had started Brooklyn College. I knew that I was going into the service.

MR: Where were you and what was your reaction to the events at Pearl Harbor.

RA: I recall it was a Sunday morning, I was a kid, I was born in 1925 so I was pretty young. Quite frankly, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. I think that everybody knew that we were going to go into a war and it was as simple as that. I think the government and Mr. Roosevelt prepared us for that.

MR: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

RA: No, I enlisted.

MR: Did you select the Air Corps?

RA: Now that's an interesting question. I always wanted to fly, that was my goal in life. I wanted to be a bird, just fly in an airplane. I read all the World War One exploits of my friends that were aces and that's what I wanted to do. When I was in high school I was 17, 17 and a half when I graduated, and I wanted to fly in naval aviation. The Navy flyers/Marine flyers were the best, had the best training. They had to be very good because you had to be able to land a plane on nothing, on a boat. I found out that I had 20/20 in one eye and 20/30 in the other eye and neither the Army, Navy, nor Marine flying units would take me. I was real depressed about that. They came around with an exam called the A-12 exam and if you passed this examination you were qualified to be an officer. You had the mental ability to be an officer which is minimal as far as I'm

concerned. You would go to college and this is where I have the big bone of contention with the government which doesn't always tell you the truth and everybody knows that. I didn't know that at seventeen and a half years old because I played it straight. They said that they would send me to college and I had a choice and I remember distinctly, having a choice of political affairs, government, what's going to happen when you take over a country, what are you going to do with them. I had a great liking, not just for flying, but also for history and for political science and later I became a lawyer.

I took the test and I passed and I managed to convince my mother that this was the thing to do and she signed for me. I graduated high school and took the Brooklyn College exam and I was admitted to Day Session which was a bit of an honor. I got up to college and was up there only a month or so, not even a full semester, and the papers finally came through and I was to be sent to Alfred University. I did not know where Alfred University is but I knew they had bells up there; they would wake you up and put you to sleep with bells. When I got up there with all these other seventeen year old kids they handed me some books and they handed me [Video calibration, audio and video missing] engineer. I said, "This is not what you told me." They said "You're going to be an engineer."

This was a Reserve program. I was not sworn into the Army but I took the Oath of Allegiance. We plodded along and I did not want to be an engineer, hated it, didn't understand it. Some of the courses that they gave you had to have prerequisites and I didn't and I played catch-up like you couldn't believe. It was very trying even though I have a little gray matter. We grumbled and mumbled and then we got good news: the Army Air Corps lowered their eye requirements, 20/20 and 20/30, so that if one eye was 20/30 they would take you into their flying program. I was in seventh heaven and there were approximately twenty other kids that were in seventh heaven. You would think that the commander of this unit, who was a major, would be delighted to think that twenty young kids are willing to go out and fly and maybe ... He was furious. We got this information from a second lieutenant who had crashed and they put him on limited service, where you weren't that disabled, you could still wear a uniform and do certain things. He had told us about this deal and that we were all pretty smart boys and that if we wanted to, when we got down to Fort Dix, we take the air cadet test. They called it air cadet/air trainee test. Twenty of us went to the major and said we wanted out, he was furious. I had one boy who said he wasn't going to go to classes any more, he had him marching up and down, up and down. We all took an oath that we'd fail which was very easy for me because I hated what I was doing, I didn't have to study any more, right?

We went to Fort Dix and we went en masse. Everybody who was in that unit went down there and that was also the kids that had passed their courses and they were razzing us. They said we were foolish, this and that, stay in the program. Well did they make a mistake because the program dropped dead right then and there. They did not go back to Alfred University, they went into the Infantry. They're the boys that didn't know what to do, couldn't take orders. We're all very rebellious, we're bright boys, it's hard to push us

around. The twenty of us passed the exam, not one of us failed, and they gave us a little card that said, "Welcome to the Air Corps." We went to our little barracks in Fort Dix. I have to digress for a second, this is kind of important. I was bitten by a dog when I was very young and I had the rabies injections. It was a big hypodermic needle, it was not a shot in the arm, but it was a needle and it would go into the wall of your stomach, men would hold your arms and it was very painful and I don't like pain. So we're at Fort Dix and we get our injections and I don't like injections because I keep thinking about needles and I get very upset. Anyway, we fall out into the street and some of the guys who had passed the test were sent to Greenboro or someplace and some guys were sent to some other place and I'm waiting for my name to be called and it hadn't been called, and another guy's name hadn't been called, about five or six of us still milling around. If you were there for a quarantine period you could get a pass. I got a pass and where did I go? I went home naturally. I got home and my mother said to me, "You don't look good." I said "I don't feel very good." I was perspiring. She called the family doctor and he came and he said, "He has the measles." My mother had been in training as a nurse. He said, "I can't treat him, he's in the Army." He made a phone call and they sent an ambulance from Staten Island and I went down, I was in an apartment house, I went down in the ambulance. I don't think they let me sit up, they made me lie down, I got the chills and all kinds of nonsense, and they took me to Staten Island. They put me in a dark room and they told me I had the German measles. I think the quarantine period was fourteen days. So there I am, in the hospital. They promised that they would send a message to Fort Dix. They said I was cured, I said can I go back home, they said absolutely not, private, you must go back to Fort Dix immediately. I went back to Fort Dix. When you get back on an Army post, the first thing you do, you show them your papers, which I did, and then you sign a book that you got in and the date, this is very important. Signed the book, went to where I was sleeping, naturally all my stuff was gone, so I had to get more stuff, blankets or whatever. All the fellas that I knew had left, they're gone, they're on their way, flying planes, they were killing Germans, I don't know. [Laughs] The week would go on, they never called my name. Every day I would go out and stand in the street.

By the way I was now barracks chief. When I was in Alfred University, it was a cadet program. We had military procedure, how to write communiques, how to read the book. We knew the Army regs, we were officer material, we were going to be officers of some sort. I knew how to march, how to do all the fancy nonsense. When the new guys would come in, I'd teach them how to make beds and all kinds of things, where to go and all that. Comes the weekend, I go home, got a pass, come back, comes the weekend, I go home, got a pass, come back. I'm on Fort Dix, I'm there, nobody's bothering me, I'm a king. Except, if you miss the series of injections, you have to go through them again. There's no way that I'm going to have anybody stick a needle in me. I decided that this is ridiculous and I would always ask, "How about me? When am I going out?" They said to relax. I wander down to the medical unit and I said, "I think it's time for me to get the second series of shots." They said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm Richard Gregory Alagna, 12228219." The serial number is exceptionally important because if you don't know it you can't get off the base. I have forgotten everything else, I sometimes have to look up

my zip code, my telephone number, but I will never forget 12228219 because you can't get a drink, you can't go play with the girls. Well, all hell broke loose. This officer came over and he started to scream at me, he said I was AWOL. I was not AWOL, I was in the hospital, they sent you a telegram, I was in an Army hospital, not a private hospital. I signed the book. He was real nasty, he said to me, "You're going out on the first shipment." I said "Where?" He said "What did you say?" I said "Where?" Understand, I had three months, approximately three months of being a cadet, realized that nobody tells you the truth, they knock you around, you have to grow up awful fast. He said, "You're going into the Infantry." I said, "You say I don't have any service records, I passed the exam." He said, "You don't have any service records, we have no record of your passing the exam, we have no record of you. When your service records catch up with you, they'll transfer you to the Air Corps." I said to him, "May I talk to you man to man?" I was all of eighteen years old. "You know in your heart that once the Infantry gets me, they're not going to let me go. They're not going to transfer me after they teach me what to do in the Infantry. I have this booklet," I had this booklet that said I was an air cadet. He said, "Anybody can get one of those." I said "It's typewritten and I don't know how to type. Give me the test, I can take the test blindfolded, it was simple." He looked at me and said, "You really did pass that exam, didn't you." I said "Yes, sir, I did and that's all I want to do is fly. I got a shot at it, you have to let me do it." "I will send you out in the first group to the Air Corps and I hope to God you're not lying to me." "I swear I'm not lying."

Here comes the fun and games. They send me out to Air Corps without any of my permanent service records, my hospitalization stuff was lost, I don't know if I went through the second series of needles, didn't care at that point. I was with men that were thirty-eight up to forty-two years old; they were going to be the laborers in the Air Corps. They were going to build the barracks, grade the roads, and do the menial things in the Air Corps. Every time I fell out, an officer would come by and say, because after all I was eighteen at the time, "What are you doing with these people?" I said you don't want to know unless you have my service records. I would talk to everybody, any time a captain, a major, anybody, I'd plead with them, "Find my records, I'm supposed to be on the other side of the field taking air cadet training." I wrote letters for them, I listened to them cry at night. They had never been away from home. One man was funny, he and his son both went down to the draft board, his son was rejected and he went.

I don't remember this incident exactly but I will tell you it's a funny one, because I like to tell the funny things that happened. I never drank coffee, I didn't like coffee. I've gotten used to it now, but I didn't drink coffee until later on when I was in the Air Corps. We went to the movies and you get back when it's late and the lights are out. But all the lights in the barracks were on and the men were all outside, holding their stomachs. Some guys grabbed us and wanted to hit us, they were very angry. They said, "How do you feel?" I said, "I feel fine, what's the matter?" They said do you drink coffee? I said "No, I drink milk, water, soda." It seems a disgruntled GI put soap suds in the coffee and washed out the entire unit. I mean, it wasn't funny but let's put it this way, if you want to

get a busted nose, I don't know which would have been better, to get a busted nose or to be on line trying to get into the john.

Funny things, I think the funniest was when the major called me in and said, "I've got some good news for you and some bad news for you, Private." I said, "Let's hear the good news, sir." "We've got your service records and you are an air cadet trainee." I said, "That's wonderful!" I was in seventh heaven, I'd already gone through basic training. The bad news is that forty-three or 47,000 cadets were washed out, summarily, zap, gone, finished. They weren't killing enough of us so they cut the program down. I said, "What does it mean?" He said "Well, I've got a problem. We don't know what to do with you." These air trainees were being sent back to their old units. They had transferred from the Infantry or the ski troops or God knows what. "But you've never been in a unit other than the Air Corps. How would you like—Catch-22—to get back as a flyer? If you volunteer to be an aerial gunner, when you finish your missions and you come back, you can get to be a flyer. I will personally see ..." I'm listening to this guy and I'm saying to myself, "Who the hell is he kidding?" By the way, I knew some fellas, I knew a navigator who came back, finished his missions, went back into training and became a pilot. It wasn't such a bad deal. So I'm now going to fly. They send me to, I don't remember, it says on my records where they sent me, they sent me to the place to become an aerial gunner. You have to understand, I really did want to fly, wanted to see what it was like, wanted a taste of this. Because of my height, they said I'd become ball turret gunner. They told me later that the tail gunners wouldn't go down in the ball. I had to gain a little proficiency, mechanical ability. If you recall I said I can't add two and two, that is, I don't like to. They made me learn the machine gun, that was the basic thing. There was a group of two flight engineers, two radio operators, an armorer/gunner, and myself. I was the only career gunner, I think it's called a 611. You had to learn how to field strip the machine gun, you had to be able to take the machine gun apart and put it together. We were supposed to be able to do it blindfolded. I was always very rebellious and always liked to make a joke. I would put the machine gun together and there would be a couple of parts left over and the sergeant didn't like that. I said, "It looks OK to me because it's flipped in the case. Why do I have to do it blindfolded?" He said, "If you're flying a night mission and you burn out a barrel—we had extra barrels on the plane, we could put them in.—you have to be able to do that. I said, "If it's night time and he can't see me and I can't see him, why do I have to do this?" My concept was if we just keep the lights off in the plane, he'll go away. The gunner on a bomber is not supposed to be looking for trouble; he's supposed to make the trouble go away. We were supposed to make them go away. I went at night on my own time; they gave me a nickname "Malfunction" because I couldn't get the thing together.

Now I'll tell you about people. When you fire a machine gun, it's not like a pistol or a rifle. It jumps all over the place and a lot of guys would be quite frightened of it. Everybody had to fire this weapon. They had them fix mounted on a tripod and they had a track that would go around and a Jeep, you couldn't hit the Jeep, but the Jeep had a target on it, and they put a governor on it to make the Jeep go around without anybody in

it, and it would go around and around and when it would come by, you would shoot the machine gun. The first time I went out, and by the way, it was a thirty caliber. It came by, I went bang-bang and a cartridge exploded in the barrel, in the breech. I had no glasses on, I was hit in the face with the cordite and it caused little blood spots and some of it was indented in my face and when it kicked back like that, I went right down to the ground. The sergeant came over and if I ever met him today, I'd kill that son-of-a-bitch. I mean it because he said to me, "What are you, a coward? Get up, clear it, and do it again." I knew later what was wrong with the weapon but I didn't know at that time. Naturally, everybody's looking at you, peer pressure, and I want to do this thing so I did it, started again, and it did it again and this time when I'm on the ground I saw a pair of saddle shoes and pinks. The only ones that wear pinks are officers and this officer said to me, "Are you alright?" Because there were little specks of blood on my face and I said, "No, sir, I'm fine, it happens all the time." He said, "What happens all the time?" I said, "The thing opens up, it explodes, the bullet comes out all over your face." He said, "This happened more than once?" Well he dressed that sergeant down. The sergeant came over and whispered in my ear, "I'll kill you if you ever come back here." I could have lost an eye, could have lost both eyes. I didn't realize until later that the gun wasn't put together properly. What possesses somebody to be that callous? I couldn't put my finger on it, I didn't know why this guy would do this at the risk of having some kid lose an eye. He had a cushy job, not being shot at, some place in the States, Florida, Texas, wherever the hell we were. Why did he do that? I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't figure out a lot of things.

Cute story. I was in Gunnery at the time but we're sitting around not doing anything, not going anyplace. They said that they needed some volunteers, that's a bad word by the way, as everybody knows. The deal was that if you pulled guard duty for a week, you'd get a pass to go to New Orleans. I said OK fine, I'll do it. They gave me a carbine, I checked it out. I was very good with weapons now and I got live ammo. I'm marching back and forth, back and forth, in the heat. There were some tents there, not too far away, about 100 feet and there were some guys that had been flying Catalinas, the Cats, they were doing submarine patrol down in New Orleans or wherever the hell they were. I'm going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, sweating like a pig. I can't see this nonsense because to me all you had to do was stand in one place and you could turn your head and look back and forth but that was what the Army wanted you to do. The Army had some wacky rules. There was a kitten and the kitten was spitting at something. I got closer to it and it was one of the biggest rattlesnakes I have ever seen, it was a doozey. The kitten is going to get bitten and die, I'm calling the kitten, the kitten won't come over. I figured I never missed anything in my life when I shot at it so I pulled back the slide on the carbine, took aim at the snake. The guy in the tent sees me and he's calling me a son-of-a-bitch because he thinks I'm shooting the kitten. I pulled the trigger, nothing happens. I eject the bullet, do it again, and nothing happens. They're lying to me again. I then yelled for the sergeant of the guard. This snake is a God-damned big snake. I figured that if the snake gets into the tent area, they're going to have a hell of a hard time. The sergeant comes over in a Jeep and I'm trying to figure how I can hit the snake, move

the kitten off to the side, I'm beside myself. He pulls out his .45, this guy couldn't hit a God-damned barn if he was sitting next to it, he points it at the snake and misses, shoots three times. "Sergeant," I yell "let me have the gun, I can hit the snake." I could hit anything, I hit the target all the time. He got pissed, managed to kill the snake. I'm now complaining about why my carbine wouldn't go off. I found out they had filed the firing pin so it wouldn't hit. What the hell was I doing with a gun that couldn't work? He got mad at me and he made me stay in the barracks. He said he's going to have me up on charges and I don't know what kind of charges, as much as I knew about Army regs and all that, I didn't do anything wrong, I tried to kill the snake, I wasn't killing a thing. He couldn't shoot worth a damn. Maybe I said something, I'm in trouble and I don't know what it is. I go into the latrine and who's sitting there. The latrines have no stalls back then and he was there sitting on the throne. He glared at me, I didn't say anything to him, he got up and left. I relieved myself and I looked over to where he had been sitting and he had taken off his belt. It was a heavy canvas belt that clipped and it had his .45 on it. I was delighted because you can't lose your weapon, you cannot lose your weapon. I picked up the .45 and I said to myself, Richard, heave it into the jungle, no one will see you. Let him sweat to figure out where his .45 is. Then another voice went off in my head that said just because he's a son-of-a-bitch, you don't have to be one. I went over to where his office was knocked on the door and he snarled at me, "What do you want?" I said I want to give you this [Extends hands] and he went like this [Moves hands to sides] and realized his cannon was missing, his .45. I said, "You left it in the latrine." He realized that I wasn't such a bad guy and he said, "Forget about the charges, you're free to go back to your unit." I said, "Wait a minute, how about my pass to New Orleans?" He said, "You kids from New York—he was a southerner—you have a pair of balls I can't believe." He gave me a pass to go to New Orleans, he laughed, I laughed. He would have been in a lot of trouble not to have had his weapon. I went to New Orleans and had a very good time. I went with another guy who was a gunner, it was fun, we had a fun time.

After learning how to fix a machine gun and all that, I had to learn how to work the ball turret. The ball turret was an instrument of death, torture, the most ridiculous thing they thought of but you would get in it, it was self-contained, it was held on by a big ring, and on the B-17 it was permanently out of the plane. On the B-24 there was a shaft and hydraulically you'd drop it and then you'd get in it. It was exceptionally tight, you could not wear a parachute in it, you could wear your harness but you couldn't wear a parachute. When I had to get in it I always had to turn my face sideways and put my face down on the gunsight and then signal the guy above to slam the door and invariably I'd get hit on the head with the door. It was not very comfortable.

Let me digress. If you recall, I desperately wanted to fly. I'd been with men that were thirty-eight, forty years old and their training was nothing and I got fatter and fatter and lazier and lazier because I wasn't really doing anything and I was so badly out of shape that I was a good twenty pounds overweight. I was about 185 at the time. We got to gunnery school and I'm taking the machine guns apart and all that but the physical part I had to play catch up. I was never much of an athlete when I was young and I would run

with everybody and do everything they did except I couldn't get over the wall. I'd hit the wall and my nails would scrape on the wall. There was an officer who thought I was horsing around. I said "I'm trying" and I hit that wall. He caught me once going around it. When I was in high school the coach always yelled at me because they used to make me go around the track. I used to go around then cut across and then go in the back and read a book. I was a kid who liked to read and I didn't want to play any of their games. On my own I went out at night after we did everything we were supposed to damn well do and I ran, losing weight. I even put crap in a knapsack to try to lose weight. I think I got over the wall. He was going to wash me out but it got to the point where he realized that nobody in their right mind would hit the wall like I hit that wall, I would have gone through the God-damned wall if I could have. I'd always get just my fingers up there. I'm short, some of these guys were six foot and they could just bounce up and grab it and pull themselves up. I couldn't get my hands up there. Forget about going up the rope, I could not go up the rope but I did build my chest up, my arms were pretty strong. Anyway, he passed me on that.

It's important that you know that I understand how things work, I just don't seem to have the ability to hold on to a screw without dropping it six times. I don't know the nomenclature of the tools that most men know, certain screwdrivers and certain bits, I have no interest in that.

I wanted to fly and now we had to get into a plane, B-17, and do our stuff that we were taught on the ground. Underneath the seat of the turret was an oxygen tube. We wore an oxygen mask with a certain length of tubing to connect to the oxygen. We went up in a B-17 and they outfitted it with long benches. My last name begins with an "A" and I was always first which was lots of fun because it would have been nice to learn by watching the other fellow. I'm supposed to go down into the turret and I've been in a turret before on the ground and I'm supposed to hook up to the oxygen and I'm supposed to stay down there and then they'll tell me come on up. We're flying above the level at which you could breathe; you could get anoxia, get brain damage, and die. You get silly, too. I go down in the turret, put my head down, slammed it shut, not breathing oxygen, just breathing the air that's there, pretty thin. I'm reaching for the tube and I get it in my hand, and I can't make contact. I'm breathing heavily and I'm nervous and I don't know how many minutes went by but I know that I can't stay there because you'll pass out and frankly, I don't know how they get you out from above. The sergeant's saying to me on the radio, "Aren't you going to get it going?" I said, "I can't breathe, I can't connect." He called me a coward. I was mortified, I was really very upset. I heard the pilot saying, "Get him the hell out of the turret." I got out and I hooked up to oxygen in the plane and guys are looking at me kind of funny. The pilot orders the sergeant who's training us to go down and see if what I said was true. He said it was true. Nobody else went down in the turret, we landed and the sergeant was a very good kid, he made all the men stand there and he apologized to me. It seems that some schmuck idiot jerk cut the tube too short. It had frayed and never thinking that the oxygen mask won't connect, some of



these guys just didn't think these things through. That was the reason and the sergeant apologized and I felt pretty good.

Anoxia—stay in the middle and never volunteer, right? We go into the pressure tank and they simulate the altitude that you're going to go up to and what the pressure is. The sergeant says, "We need three volunteers." I think boy, that's great, I'm in the middle. He says, "You, you, and you" and I was right in the middle. One guy had to write with a pad and pencil, the other guy had to do something, I forget what, and I had to do exercise, and this will show how you'll pass out. You get giddy, you begin to laugh because it's a great high. The lights got dim in the place, it looked like it was a rheostat, and I'm getting giddy and they slap an oxygen mask on me and give me pure oxygen. The other guy who was writing, his handwriting was going up and down and he finally passed out and they gave him oxygen.

I met my crew, now the crew is very strange. The pilot was an old man. At that time I was nineteen or twenty, the pilot was twenty-eight or twenty-nine and that was very old. He was also southern and he didn't take the wire out of his hat, his garrison hat. There was a wire that if you took it out and crunched it, you get that fifty mission or twenty-five mission Air Corps look. He had transferred from the Infantry and was he southern and I don't think he realized that the Civil War was over. The second officer was from Kansas, he went to the University of Kansas and he couldn't fly worth a damn. He was probably the worst pilot in the Air Corps, he was obnoxious. The navigator was a nice guy, he was a couple of years older than I am, he was an accountant. He was a flight officer, not an officer, that's the difference between an enlisted man and an officer. Some place in limbo, they gave you a bar with a little color in it, some nonsense like that. We had a bombardier who was afraid. He got us up to 30,000 feet one time and said his bombsight didn't work and he couldn't use it. We went back down; it takes a long time to go up to 30,000 feet. It turns out he didn't plug it in. We went on a practice mission, supposed to hit a target on an island surrounded by water, surrounded by a federal reserve park. He hit a farm, he was worthless. He didn't go overseas with us. I thought he was stupid then, later on I realized that he just liked to walk around in an officer's uniform with a pair of wings. He always wanted everybody to call him "Lieutenant." The nose gunner was a delight. I don't know if he had a high school education but he was an engineer, he had mechanical ability. He loved to smoke cigars. The radio operator was a millionaire's son. They owned a big fish cannery, Gorton's. Jimmy was Catholic and he couldn't make up his mind if he wanted to be a priest or marry a girl. He showed us a picture of the girl and it reminded me of the center for Notre Dame. On the very first mission—and this is one of my anti-Catholic stories—Jimmy took his Saint Christopher's medal and he hung it in the cockpit and the navigator had a fit because the pilot couldn't fly the plane correctly because it demagnetized the compass. [Laughs] There was good old Saint Christopher leading us around in circles. Needless to say, that medal wasn't used on any more missions. The engineer, his name was Brockmeyer, looked very young but he was competent at what he was doing. He could fix anything on the plane, did all the magic things. He was a slight kid and he was a wise guy. Once he picked me up in an

automobile and said he had hot-wired it. I got out of the car instantly, this kid had stolen the car. The armorer-gunner, Neil, nice guy. Neil was from Connecticut and Cornell. Most of the kids on the crew were college men. He was in advanced training and I could have killed him, I hated him for this. He had it. He was in advanced training in flying, he was the cadet officer, and they gave him his orders to go to heavy bombers, to fly multiple engines. He wanted to be a fighter pilot, as we all did, we all wanted to be Eddie Rickenbacker. He got a guy that wanted to go to bombers; he wanted to make a switch. The Army heard him say that and he must have said it in a loud voice and they washed him out. You don't tell the Army what to do. He ended up in heavy bombers. [Laughs] When I heard his story, I nearly died because I was just dying to get my hands on the controls of the plane. I did fly the plane once or twice but just when we were in the air. I liked him; he was a very nice guy. The tail gunner was a ski trooper, they were going to send him back, and he became a tail gunner. He was from the University of Chicago, we had Harvard, we had everybody on the crew. The only two non-college kids were the nose gunner and the engineer.

We're in training and we're up at Westover Field. We're flying very old planes; these were not the ones we flew in combat. We had some old planes in combat but these were bad planes. It's been often asked of me if flying was voluntary. Nobody would believe me when I said it was, you did not have to fly. At any time you could have gone in and said "I'm out." That wouldn't mean you'd be out of the Army, you just didn't fly, where they would send you, God only knows. They'd send you some place; the Army wasn't going to let you go. When I up at Westover Field, one kid from the Bronx, nice kid, said to me—I was looked upon as a guy who had the training before and I could handle some of the officers by giving them what they wanted—he said, "I can't take it." He said every time he got into the plane he thought it was going to blow up and he couldn't go near a plane again. I told him it's not a disgrace because we're in a team and if a unit can't function together, you're not helping the guy next to you and you're going to let him down when it's important. I told him to go see the commanding officer, which he did, and tell him exactly what he told me. I met him at Fort Dix when I was being discharged. He ended up as a sergeant in the Infantry; he saw hand-to-hand combat in the Philippines. The point I always made is that everybody had a point where they'd snap, where they just sat there and couldn't function.

Now I'll tell you about this great co-pilot we had. We're in the States, I'm down in the turret and this turret, you lower it down, it comes out the belly of the plane, you have to jump down in it, open it up, get in and it's hydraulic and electric. I'm listening on the interphones and I don't hear anything except the engines. It's deafening by the way, flying in a four-engine bomber. There are some portholes and I had my hands on the handles to make my turret turn and it wouldn't go, it was dead in the water. I look up in the portholes and I see some of the guys running around and I thought I saw one of the kids put on a chute. Normally we just wore chest chutes and they were kept separate because it was an additional weight you had to stand up with. I turned on the radio and tried to speak and I couldn't hear my own voice and if you can't hear your own voice it's

not coming through your headset ergo something's wrong. I realized that now I had to go back to my training, there's a way to get out of the turret. You cannot leave the turret when it's in the air, you can't drop out but there were some cranks and you could manually crank the turret around and it would come up to where you could get out and then your memory has to be "A" perfect because you had to lock it. If you didn't lock it, when you got up to get out, it would spin and you would lose your legs. Thank God the sergeant that trained me told me that. I did exactly what he told me to do and that's what comes with training. Training is a very important thing, you must do what you're supposed to do, what you're trained to do, and improvise when you have to. So I locked it, got out, pulled myself out of the well. Everybody's got their parachutes on, I put my parachute on. One of the guys said, "We have lost electrical power." The plane will still go, like an automobile, because the gasoline is flowing into the engines. The pilot's going crazy; the engineer is running around trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with the damn thing. He had rung the "get ready to bail out" bell and that's what I saw through the porthole but I didn't hear it, there's no bell in the turret. I immediately thought that there should have been a bell in the turret or that somebody should have taken a wrench and whacked on the shaft three times or whatever so I would know to get out. This story is about the co-pilot. The co-pilot's supposed to be in charge of the gunners, that was his job. He was supposed to coordinate things that we were supposed to do. They get the problem fixed, the music goes back on, the radio's on, everybody's happy. I'm finished for the day, up comes the turret, I'm not going down there again, not that day. I can't tell other guys what to do, I don't have the rank. I didn't want to let them to know that I was slightly pissed at them. They had to think for themselves because when they say get ready to bail out, they're going to go. They're not going to come and hold my hand. We land and the first thing I do is walk up front and I said to the co-pilot, "They rang the bell to get ready to bail out but there's no sound in my turret. I would like you to instruct the gunners back there to give me some kind of a signal so I can get out." This is what the son-of-a-bitch said, "When I bail out, I'll wave to you as I go by." He was a big football player, I'm five foot seven and a half and I'm from Brooklyn and you don't say things like that. I grabbed him, you're not supposed to touch an officer, it's against the rules. I turned him around and said right to his face, "As God is my witness, if I get my guns around fast enough, I'll blow you out of the sky and if I get down on the ground, I'll hunt you down and I'll kill you." I let go of him. Now I've got a problem because you don't touch an officer and you don't threaten him. But he was scum. I go back to the barracks and told one of the guys from another crew what happened. "I'm going to be called up, I'm going to go see the commanding officer..." He said, "No you're not, he's not going to say a word. Did he say that to you? Will you say that to the commanding officer? He's not going to say a word." He didn't say a word, I didn't say a word, I don't think I ever spoke to him unless he asked me a question. We put in a system where you bang on the turret. It wasn't a nice thing to say, he's going to wave to me as he goes by.

The tail gunner was a character, he had a knife, he was Jewish and he always carried a knife. My father was Roman Catholic and my mother was Greek Orthodox. I joined the Protestant Church because I was fed up with all the fighting in the family about which

church I should belong to. In the barracks one time, in came a drunk and he called me a dirty Jew. I got up and one of my crew members grabbed me and said, "You're not Jewish." And I said "Fuck him." The point of the story is that anti-Semitism permeated the Army and all of our lives back then and it just wasn't very nice.

At that particular time I bought a fountain pen, a Waterman, guaranteed for life, and it broke. I was very superstitious, most guys were superstitious. [Laughs]

We hadn't gotten overseas yet. The fire—everybody on an aircraft had to be trained to do somebody else's job in case they got sick. My nickname was "Malfunction," they made me the assistant engineer, perfect right? They taught me how to transfer fuel which is very important on a plane, which I had absolutely no concept of where the fuel went, it just made the engines go around. I learned to stand behind the pilot when we would land and I would call off the air speed because you had to land at a certain air speed or you were in deep trouble. Back then there was always someone standing when you landed a plane, I don't think they do that anymore. But then my job, what the engineer did, I would then leave, go past the turret gunner, radio operator, drop down into a well with a cat walk where the bomb bays would go to the back and I would go forward. At that point, everybody in the nose of the plane is out. That would be the nose gunner, navigator, bombardier, three people would be out. There was a machine there like a lawn mower which had a pull and it was called the "putt-putt" for want of another name. It provided the auxiliary power to run the generator on the aircraft so that you'd have electricity. When the plane lands, the nose wheel opens up, this was a B-24, and the wheel goes down and all the papers in the front of the plane would be blown all around the place. It was not my job, not that I'm saying not my job I don't do windows, but I had no knowledge that this was an important factor. It was up to those people that had their loose papers, whether they were maps or anything like that, to have them secure. So you pull the string and the machine starts, I pull it and it belched fire. On an airplane, like on a boat, fire is not a nice thing. By the way, one man I understand got a Congressional Medal of Honor, at least the story went on, that he pissed on a fire, which I thought was a very cute story, I don't believe it. His name was supposed to have been Sergeant Smith. Anyway, I put the fire out with my hands and when I got it out naturally I wouldn't turn the machine back on because I still didn't know what the hell was going on. I went up and I screamed that there was a fire and the radio operator, Jimmy Broderick, jumped down, took a fire extinguisher and completely encased it in whatever the stuff is in that. It turned out that what had burned was a comic book. I mentioned that my pilot wasn't a very forgiving person, he accused me of having that comic book. I didn't read comic books, I was into reading whatever books I could carry but I didn't read comic books. Whose comic book it was I have no idea but it had blown and caught in that particular thing. He rang a bell when he heard "fire" and the nose gunner, we were now travelling on the runway, he went out the bomb bays and he didn't get killed, he went into a rolling position. We had on leather suits and stuff like that. I was slightly incensed that I was accused of starting a fire on a plane. This man would accuse you if it were raining outside, that I had ruined the day.

I'll tell you more about the navigator. We're in Westover Field and we are told that we're going to go on a night mission to Ohio, no radio and only wing lights on. We had to navigate our way out to someplace in Ohio and bomb something out there, no dropping of bombs. I pleaded with the pilot that I was not necessary, it's a night mission, there's nothing a gunner can do in the back. He said, "You're flying." On the way back we get to the area of Westover Field and we drop down and we weren't flying on oxygen at all. He drops his wheels down and my job, as was the other gunner, Neil Larson, was to use flashlights and look at the wheels to see if the pins came out because if the pin didn't come out it meant that the landing gear was not locked and it would collapse on landing. I'm looking out and I've got the earphones on, and they're down and locked and he says to the navigator, "Are you absolutely certain that's Westover Field?" The reason he asked is that there was an airfield at Hartford and I believe there was a Navy field there. He says, "I'm reasonably certain." He then pulled the plane up, everybody went on their ass, and the fight started. He said "What do you mean? If I land the plane on a commercial airfield or the Navy, I will be the laughing stock of the Air Corps. I look out the window and I say to the pilot, "I know where the airfield is." That's when the second fight started. The navigator said, "He's only a kid." He was right, I was nineteen, he must have been about twenty-one or twenty-two, so we're all in that category of being infants. "You going to listen to him?" He said, "He said he knows where the field is." We're practically at treetop level and I told him what direction to go, straight ahead, to the left, to the right, and I said, "The airfield is directly ahead." He made the signal, the lights went on, we landed on our field. The pilot came over and he said, "How did you know where the field was?" I said, "I followed the bus route." Any flyer will know that old time flyers used to do sight navigation and you would go down and read railroad crossings and that's what I did. I knew where the movie house was and in Springfield, I'm positive that it's still there, is a good restaurant, the Student Prince, good sauerbraten. The navigator didn't speak to me, I guess he didn't want to be put down.

Then there was the time we went on another night mission in Springfield and as I told you my job was to look out the window and see if the wheels were up or down or if anything was wrong on the plane. I had my Class A uniform on, it was the only way you could get off the post. We had windows in those old planes that lifted up and there was nothing there, there was just air, I looked out and I was blinded, couldn't see, and I had a mouthful of gasoline. I fell to the ground, I was really in pain. I don't remember if I threw up or not. Neil said, "What's wrong." I said, "I can't see, I'm blind, there's a gasoline leak." Gasoline was just gulping out of the wings. He passed the word on, down we went, landed. I was sitting there, there was a canteen of water, somebody either put water on my face or I had washed my face, I could see. It turned out that when they filled the plane up it wasn't level, it was at a tilt, and they put too much gasoline in. The mission was off, I unzipped my suit, put on my hat, and my pilot said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to town." He did not appreciate that, he thought I set that whole thing up because I had a pass to go to town.

Passes—it always annoyed me that the officers could go wherever they wanted but the enlisted men could not. We created our own passes. We got a book of passes and we were under the impression, which was wrong I found out later in law school, I thought that if you signed a phony name, it meant nothing. I remember once I was stopped by an MP in Times Square and he said, “Captain Midnight?” I said, “Yeah, that’s this guy’s name” and got away with it. We would do things like that.

I think this brings us up to when we’re going to go overseas and to show you the mentality of my flying officer. We were going over by ship and we had an opportunity to go home, we were in New Jersey, I don’t know what port it was, and he volunteered his crew for KP [Kitchen Police]. Nobody else would have done a thing like that but a first-class rat. We all had a chance to go home, call your mother or your girlfriend, but he volunteered us for KP. We did not become sergeants until we were overseas so therefore we could pull KP. On the ship going over I wrenched my back very badly and I couldn’t bend over at all and I went to the medics and the medics taped me. They put tape from here [points to upper chest] down to my bellybutton and tied me up. There was no fresh water on the boat to shower, only salt water. When we were in the Irish Sea, by the way the Air Corps always had the best, we were on the top deck of this luxury liner and we’re all standing there looking at the Irish Sea and everybody screamed “Fighters coming in” and they all fell to the ground. I couldn’t move because I was taped. I wasn’t mesmerized. The only way I could fall would be to fall on my ass or flat on my face. Before they skimmed by, I said “three Spitfires” and they thought that was wonderful, what tremendous aircraft recognition this kid had.

They always had to test your ability to function as a gunner and they would put film next to your machine gun and it would film through your gun sight. We had very special gun sights, a Sperry invention. It had a line and you had to do all kinds of crazy things. The first time everybody did it in their turrets or their waists and I’m down in the turret. One of the gentlemen, I’m sure it was an officer, used the relief tube. A relief tube is a funnel and you would urinate into this funnel and the urine would go out the plane and it would come back and splash over the turret. Now a little urine is not going to hurt you, but it colored the entire area of the turret where my gun sight would function. I had a problem because they brought this plane up and they wanted me to shoot at it and I couldn’t very well shoot at it so I used my finger and I went like this [waggles finger] and I made some film. When we went to the briefing everybody had good grades and they said that the ball turret gunner was very creative but we figured out it had to be his finger because we played it over and over again. Up we go again and I told them again, “Don’t use the funnel until I’m out of there.” Well, they did it again. This is no joke because we had to go up pretty high and we had to be on oxygen. The third time I heard the co-pilot say, “I wet my leg, my leg is wet.” The pilot said, “What do you mean you wet your leg?” “I had to use the relief tube and it’s been cut.” The pilot said to me, “Did you cut the relief tube?” I said, “Me, sir? Not I, sir.” You piss on me once, you piss on me twice, the third time you don’t get a shot at it. I cut it. When we got the film back I got a commendation which made me very happy because they used my film for a training film. It was very

unique, you had to recognize the aircraft you were firing at, it had to be a certain length, etc., and you'd set it in quickly into your gun sight which is a computer and then you had to cross it, you did everything, you did it with your feet, with your hands, it was quite a complicated thing but allegedly it was very accurate.

So now we're going overseas and I'm all taped up and I'm itchy and we get off and we're in England and we go to a place where we're going to be assigned to a squadron and I'm desperate because I can't get at this tape. You must also remember that I was issued a .45, a lot of people wondered about that because in the Pacific I understand crew members were issued shotguns or carbines but I was issued a .45 sidearm. As soon as we got to where we were and we dumped our bags I immediately went to sick call. You have to picture I had on a flight jacket and I had a .45 under my armpit. I go in and I said to the corporal, I just got here, I didn't have time to sign the sick book, but I really have to see the doctor, I've got to get rid of this, it's driving me crazy. He said, "Don't worry, I'll get you in." When I heard a voice say, is there any more, that's it, nobody else on the sick book. No we have one more man out there. This is what this officer and gentleman says, "I don't care if he has appendicitis, if he hasn't signed the sick book, I'm not seeing him." He stepped out of the office and I said, "You son-of-a-bitch, I wouldn't let you touch me with a ten foot pole. They told me that when I got overseas, you guys were going to lighten up a little bit." I don't know what his problem was, he wasn't being shot at, he was in England, he was taking care of guys that had colds, athlete's foot, etc. His mouth was agape and my jacket was open and I think he saw the .45. I was slightly beyond the edge at that moment. The corporal was dumbfounded and I turned around and walked out, nobody came after me. I went back to where I was billeted and I said, I think I'm going to be arrested again. Because that's what they do to people, you don't yell at officers. A nice kid from Brooklyn said, "Don't worry, you stay here in the barracks, I'll bring you food, you'll stay hidden." I said, "But the tape." He said, "Come with me," and we went into the shower. He grabbed the tape, he took off every hair on my chest, on my back, and then I managed to get some sleep.

Now here comes the fun and games and this is an important one. We end up in the 445<sup>th</sup>/700<sup>th</sup> Squadron. The very first night we get there, I honestly thought I had been dropped into an insane asylum. The crew that had been there had been wiped out and these fellows were absolutely bonkers, at least that was my impression. I had never belonged to Greek societies or anything like that. One fellow had a bolt from a fifty caliber machine gun and he slipped a fifty caliber bullet in the facing and he had a hammer and he's going to hit it. When you do something like that, it's going to explode, the whole thing is going to rupture, you're going to be in trouble. It didn't explode but the slug went into the door, I didn't know that he took all the stuff out of the thing, it was a gag. They also had set up a guy that would come in the door and just before he'd come in, some guy would throw a knife and it would hit the door. I turned to one of my fellow gunners and said, "I think they're going to kill me before the Germans do." Later they told us that it was sort of like an initiation to their barracks. I vowed that I would get my revenge. After being there some time and flying quite a number of missions and being

slightly insane, I took a belt of fifty caliber machine gun rounds, there must have been about twelve of them in metal links. I pulled all of the cordite out of them but I kept the caps, and I put back the slugs. I had it draped over my bed as a souvenir. I vowed, I have coursing through my veins Romanian and Sicilian blood and we all believe in getting revenge. They were playing poker, it was the afternoon and nobody was flying, it was raining like hell. I went through my act, I'm too young to die—it was a pretty good act. They're playing poker and paying no attention to me. I said "I can't stand it, it's driving me crazy, sooner or later it's going to kill me, I'm dying of this and that." Somebody said "Shut up" and I took the ammo, walked over to the potbelly stove, said "To hell with all of you," and I dropped it into the stove. One guy went through the window into the mud, into the rain. [Laughs] Guys hit the doors, they went all over and I'm standing there screaming what did I do, what did I do? It turns all it did was go pop pop pop and fortunately none of the slugs went through the stove. They chased me and threw mud pies at me and I didn't care because I got my revenge. [Laughs]

We used to play poker and when they played poker, the guys would sit with their cards up close. We would steal, take home, let's put it that way, because we didn't sell them to anybody, Very pistol cartridges. It goes in a Very pistol and it's a flare gun, the flares would either be red-red, red-green, whatever colors, and we'd snap off the shotgun shell part and I'd roll it up in newspaper and we'd feed the fire. When they're playing poker, we'd just drop it in and suddenly the entire barracks room would turn full of red smoke, green smoke. When it cleared, they had their hands on the cards and the money, it was hilarious. One hand was always on the cards, the other was always on the money, because we were all conditioned to this gag. Gags there were quite a few. When you'd go to the latrine very at night, we'd take a Very pistol out, load it and fire it. The MPs would come and they'd say, "Who did that?" We'd say, "The guys over there" and they would roust those guys and give them hell. The ground pounders, the ground personnel disliked us immensely. They had a perpetual hate because we made more money than they did. I was a staff sergeant and I made the equivalency in pay of a captain. Overseas pay, flight pay and we threw our money around like it didn't matter for the simple reason that the next morning you might be eating sauerbraten someplace.

Let me tell you the story about the oranges. An aborted mission means they send you back, something happened, somebody changed their mind. We went to the briefing, then we went to breakfast and they came in and said the mission was aborted. That was very good, marvelous, and all hell broke loose in the mess hall. As we were very privileged and we did get fresh eggs, I think, and good meat and all that nonsense, we got oranges. They started to throw the oranges around. I grew up during the Depression and I didn't think that was funny. They had just gone bonko. I kept picking up the oranges that weren't spoiled and I had a gas mask kit that the first thing I did when we got to England was throw the gas mask away and put my underwear and socks in and use for an overnight bag. I stuffed it full of oranges. When you weren't flying, there was nothing to do. The only duty that we had would be at night, to guard your airplane, they would trust



us for that, but we had no KP and we didn't pull guard duty other than on the plane. I went back and I got into my Class A uniform and I flew out of a place called Tiverton—don't ask me how to spell it—which was near Norwich. I changed trains at Ipswich and went to Norwich, which was a delight because I liked old things and castles and to go around and see things. I figured I'd spend the day at Norwich, have dinner there, and then come back. I take the oranges and I get off the train and I'm there on a corner and I called the kids over. The kids always wanted chewing gum and chocolate and cigarettes, and they wouldn't take the cigarettes that we got for free, they wanted the good cigarettes. I'm giving away oranges, and I'm nineteen or twenty, and a woman comes out of a house with an umbrella and she starts to beat me with it. My mother always said you never ever hit a woman, you can restrain a woman, but you never hit her. I ran into a pub and I'm out of breath and guys there are laughing and I said, "What did I do wrong?" An Englishman said to me, "She thought you were a dirty old man." I didn't know what a dirty old man was and when they explained it to me I was furious and I came that close to hitting a woman. I didn't think it was funny that she would accuse me of something like that. They didn't have oranges or any kind of citrus. They didn't bring in anything in for the English.

Let me tell you about meeting an old friend. I had a buddy who was in the Infantry and he got lucky. Just before going to France, they discovered he had flat feet. Just like the Army, they discover you have only one leg or something like that. They had him at a repo depot someplace in England. I wrote to him, he wrote to me, I didn't know where he was, he didn't know where I was and I'm not supposed to tell him where I am because God forbid the Germans would find out although the Germans knew exactly where we were every minute of the day. Every night before a mission they would tell us where we were going, that was very nice, I enjoyed that immensely. We'd go into a room with MPs and a screen and they'd lock the door, just like in the movies, and then they'd pull it up and you'd find out what the mission is for the day. Except I knew what the mission was for the day because the German with the best jazz program told me where we were going. "The 445<sup>th</sup>, you will be our guests" blah, blah, blah. The cook knew where we were going, the guys in the hallway knew where we were going. Getting back to my friend, I wanted to find my friend. I went to London, to Headquarters, which was a mistake. All I wanted was for them to tell me where my old buddy was. I got into Headquarters and when I finally told them what I wanted, they threw me through the door, they literally kicked me out. They told me I was insane and that the Army doesn't function that way. So using what knowledge I had, I had an officer un-censor my letter. I go to him and I said, "Sal, I'm at this base, I'm at this telephone number, you can reach me, that's where my squadron is. Kindly tell me where you are." This officer was nice enough, he said, "You're absolutely right, it's stupid" and he signed it and stamped it. It went V-mail all the way to the States and all the way back again. We finally got together, he phoned me and I got on a train because I had all the time in the world, by that time I think I was an extra gunner. I went to see him and he was in a repo depot which means all these poor guys that were broken up and had to be rehabilitated and reassigned, things like that. I said, "Get on your Class A's, let's get out of here and have dinner." He said, "The food

here is better than the food in town.” It was hospital food and they had beautiful food. When I saw some guys in black uniforms, I didn’t like the black. We were told if you got shot down, you didn’t surrender to anybody but a guy in a green uniform, never to a man in a black uniform, they were the SS and they took very poorly to... [Interviewer interrupts] We’re sitting at this table having coffee with my friend Sal and I said, “Who are those people?” and he said, “They’re ex-paratroopers that are broken up and they’re here training everybody to get them in shape and they wear these black gym suits. I said in a very loud voice, “You mean that stupid son-of-a-bitch over there is an ex-paratrooper, the one with the big nose? That god-awful looking piece of shit?” My friend is going crazy, he says “He’s going to hear you!” I said, “I want him to hear me.” It was a kid I knew from grade school and we hugged each other and he came over and had coffee and laughed. He had jumped the day before D-Day, they put guys on the ground. When he heard what I was doing he said, “Could I come to your airfield?” I said “Why?” and he said, “Can you get me on a plane?” [End of disc 1]

RA: We were talking about being superstitious. So naturally I convinced him that even though I could get him on a plane because we were always flying practice missions, practice, practice, practice, that’s the name of the game. My friend Sal said he wanted to come visit me. So we set up a date and I set up a pilot that would take us. In fact it was my old pilot who even though I didn’t particularly like, he was a very good flier, I trust him in flying. I got him all outfitted in all the pants and the this and the that because we didn’t know if we were going to be on high altitude or not. I had a buddy who had a Jeep take us out to the plane. When we went out there, the plane’s engines were wind milling. The way you enter a B-24 was through the back of the plane, not the bomb bays, the best way’s the back. They’d open up the door, you’d throw your equipment in, you’d grab and then you could pull your arms, you could lift yourself and get into the plane. I took all of the heavy equipment. I left him with the two parachutes, two chest suits. When I pulled myself in, the guys in the waist were laughing, I couldn’t hear them but you could see on their faces they’re laughing and I looked out the waist window and what had happened was that he picked up both parachutes by the red handles and he popped them of course. [Laughter] The parachutes opened and the Jeep was on only two wheels now. The sergeant whose Jeep it was was trying to spill the air out of it. I jumped down, I get out, he’s standing there like he had wet his pants, he’s just holding on to the two handles. He has a red handle as a souvenir and I have one as a souvenir. The pilot said do you still want to go and I said sure but then they told us they had only one chute and I never flew without a chute. I asked my friend Sal if he wanted to go and he said no, he didn’t feel comfortable doing that so he didn’t go for his airplane ride.

We’re in England and we’re in the war. I think I told you the story about them going through the window and that nonsense. You had to have your own cutlery, your own knife, fork, and spoon. Our mess hall didn’t have any, why I have no idea, I’m sure the officers did. They had no drinking cups at all so we always had to have with us our own little canteen that clipped on to your belt. Mine was stolen once. I found out it was taken by a guy right in the barracks and it had my initials on it. I said, “That’s mine.” One of

the other guys said, "But he has nothing to drink from." I said, "Join the crowd, neither do I" and I took back my cup.

I told you that you had to pull duty by taking care of the airplanes at night just before they took off, that was the only duty you had to do. One time I was called to do it and it was cold and wet and I was very tired and I had been carousing and I couldn't keep my eyes open. I knew that if you fell asleep you could be court marshaled. It wasn't very nice to fall asleep because the Germans were doing very nasty things. They were dropping paratroopers down, espionage kind of guys, and they would drop fountain pens into our airplanes. They looked like fountain pens but they were altimeter bombs, so that when the bombers got up to a certain altitude this thing would explode and the plane would go down. It was a very good method. We had to make sure nobody got near the planes. I broke into an escape kit and I took out the stay-awake pill. When you were shot down you had certain things in this thing. You had morphine which was never there and you had other stuff and you had this pill. I guess it's what the kids use in college to stay awake but this was a super pill because this was supposed to make you feel like Superman. I did not want to be court marshaled so I took the pill, took some water and I felt great. I'd never taken drugs in my life but this was marvelous. They told me they weren't going to come for the plane until 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and wouldn't you know it, at 2:00 in the morning they come over and they say, "You can leave now." I said "Why" and they said they had changed the mission to something else. I went back to my barracks and I put my head on the pillow. I closed my eyes and it was like when you snap a window [shade] up, it rolls up. I couldn't keep my eyelids closed, my eyelids would not close. Around 4:00 the next day it was like somebody hit me with a baseball bat, I just collapsed. That was a great pill.

A couple of years back, I went to Mitchell Field with a buddy of mine to look at old airplanes, he likes old airplanes. There were some people there from the Eighth Air Force Southern Air Wing and I joined. It was ten bucks and I figured I'd get to see some old airplanes. I never have been to a meeting, I'm not a real joiner, but for them I wrote some stories. If I may I'll read them to you or maybe not read them, or just tell you what they are.

MR: Were you in the same plane all the time?

RA: No.

MR: No, so you didn't have a named plane with nose art?

RA: No. You didn't have the same plane. In fact, that's a funny story. There was a plane called Patches and they should have made a memorial to that plane, I flew home in that plane. Patches had literally over 100 flak holes in it. They renamed it Patches because, and by the way, it flew at a tilt, that was funny. It sounds silly but it flew sideways: the way you would normally fly this way it seemed like one of the wings went just slightly out of tilt. If you managed to get Patches, if Patches was assigned to you, you knew you

were coming home. Nobody's going to take that plane down, that was a good luck plane. OK, let me tell you about that.

First of all I became an extra gunner but that's something else. Coming home the adjutant officer in the squadron said I would fly with him and I would fly the nose on the B-24. We didn't know where we were going to go, we had no idea whether we were going to go to India or we were going to go home but they said we're going to go home and we're going to have to do some navigational flights. I'm flying the nose and we're supposed to go up to the tip of Scotland, turn around, and come back and land. I'm in the nose, there's no more Germans, all the Nazis by the way died, they disappeared, there wasn't a Nazi left in Germany. I assure you, the UN [United Nations] knows this for a fact, they all went to Sweden. Anyway, something hit my eyes, sunlight, I was resting, I was probably asleep, nothing to do because they're nothing to see. I see sunlight, a rim of sunlight, and we're supposed to not be flying at night but up there it's always very bright. I look forward and I see nothing but water, look to my left, water, look to my right, water. We are no longer over Scotland. This I knew, you don't have to be a bright boy to know that Scotland is not inundated with water. This is the North Sea or the Atlantic Ocean or God knows what. I turn my head around and the navigator, I have no idea who he was—it wasn't my old navigator—he was sound asleep. True story, not a joke. In the B-24 from that angle you could see up into where the pilot's and co-pilot's seats were and both of them were out like this [stretches legs], they were relaxed, they were asleep. Now the rest of the guys in the back, I don't know what the hell they were doing, they were playing cards or they were asleep, who knows what. I put my hand to my throat mike and I said in a very low quiet controlled voice, "Hi, is there anybody in this aircraft that's awake? I don't want to upset anybody but is there anybody in this aircraft..." Then the fun started. The pilot yelled to the co-pilot, "You were supposed to be flying, you were supposed to be." They had it on George, George is the automatic pilot and we were flying out to God knows where. The navigator woke up and they were yelling at one another and I'm saying to myself, "What a bunch of fuck ups." This to me wasn't practice, practice, practice, this was screw up, screw up, screw up.

Now we get down on the ground and I don't know how many days went by but the pilot said to me, "Richard," by the way he was a decent guy, he called me Richard. He said, "Richard, do you have a wife?" I said, "No sir, I do not." "Do you have a real girlfriend that you want to get home to?" I'd only been overseas for a couple of months, I said "No, I don't mind." And he said, "Look, I've got a young pilot that is willing and who wants very much to fly the nose to come home, he's married, he wants to see his wife. I'll get you on somebody else's crew." Because he was the adjutant, he could do all this paperwork. I said "OK, but please, no boats, I've had it with the boats, I don't want to go on another boat." He said, "No, I'll get you on another crew." And that's how I got onto Patches.

Let's move ahead. I get home, I get this that, I get thirty days or fifteen, whatever it is, and I get back to this airfield, the war is still going on in Japan. Some of my buddies came over and they grabbed me and they said, "How the hell did you get out?" I said,

“Out of what?” The adjutant went down in the drink. I said, “That’s the way it goes, that’s the way it goes.” So sometimes you get lucky.

Going back. We took off on a mission to Berlin. Berlin’s a nasty place to go, it had a bad reputation. We were the first wave over wherever the hell we were going, the target area. It’s a long, long flight and when you flew in those planes you got down on the ground and you always knew who flew that day because they shouted, everybody shouted. Nobody could hear, your hearing had gone. The engines, you were eight hours, maybe nine hours, who knew how long you were in the plane. This guy runs up to me and says, “You were in the first wave, how many went down?” I said “We were lucky, they caught hell behind us.” He cursed like a son-of-a-bitch: he had book on us, he was running a pool. This was Sergeant Grayboy, my buddy, one of my favorite friends. Sergeant Grayboy would book on anything. There was another guy that I hated, was the guy that came up after a mission and said “Thank God you got back.” He was an armorer. I never heard anybody say thank God you came back, I was really quite thrilled. I said that’s very nice because he was now going to take out the guns and do the dirty work in the plane. Turned out, he said “I left my coffee cup in your plane and I couldn’t get a cup of coffee.”

We went on a mission and they aborted the mission. It was a bad one to begin with because planes were running into one another. We took off in fog and you got up to six thousand fog, ten thousand fog, twelve thousand fog, you’re going up there and there’s nothing but fog. And then it wasn’t fog any more, it was contrails. We had to form on flares, the flare color. That’s when I discovered all the fun things we did with flares. We didn’t see the planes hit, you just saw the big explosion, you saw the big red, you felt the vibration. So the pilot was pretty smart, he was a good pilot, he was just not a nice person. He decided that we’ll fly around, burn up gasoline and do whatever we have to do with the bombs. So we’re flying around in the North Sea all by ourselves and the navigator is getting upset and rightfully so because the fighters are going to pick up a single aircraft and you’re a dead goose. So he sees a bastard squadron—we all had different tail markings and you could tell from the tail markings that these guys were doing the same thing, they had the smarts to say let’s stay together. He tacks on and the navigator was still pretty bright. He said “What if it’s a German weather ship?” When B-24’s went down, they didn’t always break up completely and some of them were actually captured with just the landing gear broken. They would rebuild them, fly them up and try to infiltrate our squadrons, they would find out where we’re going, listen to the conversation. You’d just be stuck because if this was a German leading us around on a merry goose chase we’re in deep trouble. He goes up front, writes down all the data on the guy’s tail, all that crap. I think they talked to one another with something or other. He said we’re going to pull the pins on the bombs. So we went into the bomb bays, you had to take the cotter pins out of the bombs. Then all hell broke loose, the place turned into a shooting gallery and we were hit and we dropped our bomb. We didn’t know who we hit, what poor stupid bastard on the ground was so upset that he decided to fire. If he didn’t fire at us, we wouldn’t have dropped the bomb. Our pilot was very upset because he

wanted to be and he did become a lead pilot. He wanted a promotion so badly. Anyway, we get back and all the other members of our squadron had gotten back much earlier. We come back, one engine's out, all kinds of holes in the plane, the crew chief is mad as hell because he would rather that we'd gone down and he wouldn't have to repair the plane—it's true, that's the way the guy felt, that's what he said, "Look what you did to my plane...how many hours I'm going to be working on this." I wanted to kick his butt.

You have to understand I'm dead and I go back to our barracks and everything is gone. The bedding is gone, my footlocker is gone, my shirts, pants, stuff that's hung up, are gone. What's going on? It seems that their practice was that when a crew went down, they immediately took the footlocker because they were going to send things home to the families and they would go through it to make sure there wasn't anything in it that would upset a wife, girlie pictures, whatever some idiot might have in his footlocker. Everything was fine, I got everything back except my tunic. There were no tunics to be had on my base—this is old Catch-22 again—you can't get off the base unless you were in a Class A uniform. You can't get a Class A uniform because they don't have any, right? If I could get off the base, I could buy one because the English had these Army-Navy shops and I could go in and for \$30-\$40 bucks I could get another jacket but I can't get off the base. I was very upset. Along comes a guy with my jacket on. I could tell my jacket because I could not sew, couldn't do any of those girl things. I was actually the worst soldier in the world: I would take cotter pins and put the buttons on with cotter pins and hide it so no one would see it. I had a special pair of silver wings that I had bought, a little fancier than what the other guys had because I thought it was kind of cute. Also, the jacket had my name stenciled in the back with my serial number. I said, "That's my jacket" and he said, "But it fits me." I want to keep going back to this business about Brooklyn. It was an invitation to a fight; he wanted me to fight him for my jacket. One guy said to me when I told him, "Why didn't you call an MP?" I said, "I never called a cop in my life." When I was a kid the cops used to hit us with billies, make us move. We were playing stickball or we were disruptive or we were too noisy or this or that. I just looked at him, I put my hand in my jacket, pulled out my .45, pointed it right at him and I said to him in a very nice calm voice, "On the jacket is a marksmanship medal for the .45. I'm going to cock it, I'm going to take the safety off, I'm going to shoot you and I'm not going to get any blood on the jacket." I had it pointed just where the jacket ended. He took the jacket off immediately, threw it down, and away he went. I've been asked by many guys would I have shot him. I think I would have, I honestly think at that point, after the aggravation I had that day, that this clown is stealing something that belongs to me right in front of me and he wants me to punch him in the nose, I think I would have shot him.

Now, Grayboy—I think I told you before about this guy—he was into everything, he was into black market, he had a beautiful leather jacket. I never got a leather jacket, I'm a deprived person. We had a deal. He wanted my camera which I wouldn't sell him—oh, the camera story. When you were flying, when planes got hit, guys would bail out, they would want to know how many guys got bailed out but everybody had a different count so taking a photograph was rather important. Photography was very strong with me and I

picked up this K-20 camera, like a Speed Graphic, and I took some beautiful pictures. When we down on the mission I went to the photographic unit, I knocked on the door, wanted to see my pictures. They said it was classified. I said what are you talking about, I took the pictures, I want to see how they came out. He said "Sergeant, if you don't go away, we're calling the MPs." I'm banging on the door, I want to see my pictures, I don't see anything wrong with just looking at them, give me one little snapshot for a souvenir. They gave me a batch of pictures and they sent me away, but not of the mission I flew. Under threat of calling the MPs which I knew would be trouble. Anyway, Grayboy and the camera, he wanted my camera, I wanted his jacket. We couldn't make a deal so we made an announcement in the barracks that if Grayboy got killed, I got the jacket, and if I went down, he got the camera. One morning he went up to fly and he had on the jacket and I told him to take it off. He said, "It's cold outside." I said, "I don't give a God-damn, take the jacket off." I made him take the jacket off and wear a sweater because we had a deal.

I became an extra gunner. My pilot did some silly things and he got away with them, they promoted him, he was a good flyer. The tail gunner went, I went, the engineer went, everybody off the crew went and he got other personnel to train him to be a lead pilot. I'm doing nothing now, I'm without a crew, walking around, having fun, I could do anything I want, but I couldn't go home until I finished my tour. It's driving me slightly crazy. The war was coming to an end and I wasn't going to see it, but I really did love to fly.

Neil, the armorer-gunner, thought one time I got hit because my leg got sopping wet. I had a flask of whiskey that my father had sent to me. I thought it was metal but it was leather and glass and it broke and Scotch ran down my leg and that's a disaster. Neil liked to play chess, I love to play chess, played chess with him all the time, he never won a game. I met him in London once, we were no longer crew members, and he said, one more game of chess. He said check, I finally got you. I looked at it and I said that's a good move but when I move out of it, it's mate. He had a fit, he absolutely went bonkers.

Let me tell you the story about Grayboy and flying the last mission. Everybody wanted to go home, be a hero or whatever you want to call it. One night in bed, Grayboy slept in the bed next to me, and he was doing something I have never seen anybody do. He was putting out his cigarettes with his fingertips, then he'd throw the cigarette down on the ground and light another one. He had plenty of cigarettes. He's lighting cigarettes and putting them out with his fingers and I said to him, "Grayboy, you've got a problem, you want to talk about this?" He said, "This is my last mission, this is it." We had different deals when you're an extra gunner. He started with the numbers, a couple hundred bucks, a couple more hundred dollars cash, I was a poor kid, he had money, he was into the black market, he could get you anything you wanted. He wanted me to fly his last mission. You ask how could a guy do that? Well, it was very easy. When somebody was sick and you were flying their mission, your name is Grayboy mine is Alagna so they know on the roster that Sergeant Alagna is to fly in Tom Jones' plane. You'd show up and you had your helmet on, you had your goggles on the top of your head, he never saw

you before, this is wild dark and wooly. All he wanted was a body at a machine gun or in a turret. When you come back, he gets the credit and you get the money so yes, it was done. How many times it was done, I have no idea but it was done. I'm sitting there with Grayboy and I said, "I'm not afraid of flying and I don't think I'm going to get killed. If I thought I was going to get killed, I'd stop flying." It was a voluntary thing and if you really wanted to get out of just that day without going through any nonsense, just walk into Headquarters and punch the officer right in the mouth. You want a nice place to eat and sleep where it's nice and safe? They give you a nice little cage. You just walk in and pop him in the nose. And they say what did you do that for and you say, I don't know, just don't like officers. The MPs will take you away. I don't think I want to fly your last mission because I really don't know if I'm going to have to bail out, which I didn't look forward to, ever. If I had to bail out and I float down to Germany, they're not going to look lightly upon me. I'm not a woodsy kind of guy, I'm not going to be able to run through the woods and eat the berries. I would probably end up being in some Stalag someplace. So now, Grayboy, think of this: I'm in Stalag something and you are now me. Being me you have to fly the balance of my missions, you have to answer my mother's mail that's coming in, my girlfriend's mail that's coming in and when the war is over and they come and get me out of that prison, do you honestly think they're going to give me a hero's welcome? I will be AWOL, as simple as that. I'll go from a German prison to an American prison, for a couple of bucks, I won't do it. He got on the plane, I put him on the plane with a bottle of Scotch, he was drunk, he flew his last mission. He was as nutty as a fruitcake.

Let me tell you one last thing. When I finally got home, not swimming the Atlantic, I was asked by a nice corporal, "Sergeant, I have to ask you, would you like to fly against the Japanese?" I couldn't believe anybody would ever ask me that question, ever. He said, "You have enough combat hours, you don't have to fly against the Japanese." I said, "Thank you very much, you've made my mother very happy. I would like very much to walk around in my Class A uniform with my ribbons, my wings, chase after all the girls that you've been chasing. That's what I want to do." Then I tried to get out of the Army and that was next to impossible.

I got into lots of trouble. Every time we went some place, they wanted me to do something I didn't want to do, like stay. I never went AWOL in my life, I never spent a day in detention other than that crazy man [Audio breaks up] and the poor kid behind me says, "I can't go." [Audio breaks up] no Purple Hearts [Audio breaks up] that I didn't like the Army, I didn't like playing soldier. The war was over, I wanted to go home. I did what I was supposed to do, I volunteered, it's over, just send me home. [To interviewer—Thank you.]

MR: Thank you.

[End of disc 2]