

James S. Andrecheck
Interviewee

Interviewers
Kyle Bridger
Tia Van Winkler

Interviewed on June 2, 2009
Richfield, Springs, NY

KB: What is your full name?

JA: James S. Andrecheck.

KB: When were you born?

JA: September 27, 1921.

KB: Where were you born?

JA: I was born in Beery's Bay, Ontario¹.

KB: Where were you raised?

JA: In Henderson, New York.

KB: What was your pre-war education?

JA: I went to high school and I quit in my senior year.

KB: What was your occupation?

JA: Farmer. I was on the farm - my father's farm.

KB: What do you remember about entering the service?

JA: Well, I decided to enlist. So I quit school and I joined October 6, 1939. I went in the Air Force. I went to Panama. I wanted to get out of the farm. [chuckles] That's the best

¹ Transcriber note: Interviewee wrote Beery's Bay, Ontario as place of birth. Transcriber could not find a place named Beery's Bay, but did find Barry's Bay, Ontario.

thing I ever done, for me though. Because if I would've stayed on the farm and the war come out, I'd of probably got drafted in the Army, which I don't think that I could be a foot soldier, so I joined the Army Air Force.

KB: Why did you choose the Air Force?

JA: Because I like to fly, I guess.

KB: When did you enter the service?

JA: October 6, 1939. I went to Fort Slocum, New York.

KB: How many of your siblings were in the service?

JA: Five.

KB: Were you a pilot? Or were you a...

JA: I was a flight engineer, belly turret gunner. I was first flight engineer, belly gunner.

KB: What was your basic training?

JA: Well, we had training, you know, just like regular training. Flying all the time and practicing landings, and all that kind of stuff. Nothing fancy, but we had to learn how to shoot... just like that.

KB: How was this experience for you? Your basic training?

JA: Experience? Basic training? Well, I really didn't have much basic training. Because I was a... I already had quite a lot of training before the war started. Because see, I went through a tech school at Rio Hata, Panama, to mechanic's school. So I became a flight engineer. So I didn't... when I come back to the United States we formed the 459th Bomb Group. We had training, you know... different kinds of training. We went to Florida for training, we went to Utah for training, then back to Davis Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona. We kept training all the time.

KB: What do you remember most about basic training?

JA: Not really much. You know, basic training was a breeze, for me. I knew more than the pilot.

KB: Because you had already gone through so much training before hand?

JA: Yeah. I had a lot of training when I went to Panama.

KB: While in the military, what was your assignment?

JA: I was a flight engineer. And the number, the number, the numbering that they had was 748 - flight engineer. I was first flight engineer. And I was an instructor too.

KB: What countries did you have to go to?

JA: Well, I was in Italy when stationed overseas. Cerignola, Italy. That's where the base was.

KB: Where was your theater of operations?

JA: Italy. Cerignola, Italy.

KB: How was life there?

JA: It was alright. It was rough. When we got there, it was raining like heck and everything. And we had no place to sleep. We had what we called pup tents. You know what a pup tent is? Your head sticks out one side end, and your feet stick out the other side. It was wet, raining. So we landed in, I think like in February, 1944 in Cerignola, Italy. We drove the Germans out, then we flew in. We was in Tunisia at the time. We had to stay there until the Germans left Cerignola, Italy, then we went there.

KB: What kind of planes were you in?

JA: Like that [points] B-24.

KB: What bombings did you take part in?

JA: Oh, a whole bunch of bombings. Gee, I got a whole list, all this... but some of them were pretty rough! I went down Polesti, I think three times. Then we finally... Styer, Austria was a real battle. We lost 65 four-engine bombers on that mission. We was lucky to come home.

KB: Why did you have to bomb so many times? Did you like...

JA: Well, it was a quota. Like in England, it was 35 missions. We had 50 missions because we were short of crews. So we had to fly 50 missions. After you got done 50 missions, you'd go on home.

KB: What kind of equipment did you use?

JA: Well, we had our regular, our machine guns, that's all. They gave you a .45 to carry, which I never used. It's no good anyway, far as I'm concerned. And we had .50 caliber machine guns on that B-24. That's all the equipment we had, up in the air.

KB: What was it like, using that equipment?

JA: Oh hell... Well, when the fighters come, you have to use it. You have to shoot somebody, or they'll shoot you. So we threw a lot of ammo out. I was gonna bring a .50 caliber bullet back, but I didn't dare bring it, because it's still alive. Show it to you. Armor piercing – go through three inches of steel, just about.

KB: How much time did you spend in the plane?

JA: Well, it all depended; a short mission would be four hours, a long mission would be eight, between eight, or maybe a little more. That's coming and going. That's a long time.

KB: How was combat similar to that of what you're trained for?

JA: Well... I don't quite get that. I...

KB: Was combat similar to your basic training or was it different?

JA: You had to learn how to shoot. That's for one thing. You had to learn how to take the .50 caliber machine gun apart blindfolded and put it together blindfolded and make sure it works! Because a lot of their machine guns, these new gunners, they'd field strip it, and put the parts in backwards and when they'd get up there where they need them, they ain't got nothing to shoot with. I could take the thing apart and put it together in minute or so. Blindfolded! [laughs] It weighs 64 pounds, a .50 caliber machine gun. It'll shoot 800 rounds a minute. So I had twin guns on my turret, so I could shoot 1,600 rounds out in one minute. We had a lot of ammunition on board, and we used it too! Sometimes we'd come home dry. No more ammunition left.

KB: What would happen if you ran out?

JA: Well, you just ran out. [laughs]

KB: What was it like being under fire for the first time?

JA: Well, I tell you, we had no fear. I had no fear at all. You just went out there and done your job, but no fear. A German come out on my turret, I could see his face just like yours [points at interviewer]. I took, I don't know whether I shot him or not, but he was, I think he was dead. So boy, I tell you, it was pretty rough up there. When you consider it was 50 – 60 below zero, yeah. And the waist gunners, they'd come back, they had the

goggles on and stuff, and their faces would be all black from the puff, from the ack-ack guns. Like those in the coal mine. [Laughs]

KB: Did you ever see another U.S. plane get shot down?

JA: Oh, I seen a lot of them. First mission I seen one blow right up! Milk runs, they called them. They call them “milk runs” because it’s an easy mission, right? Now this here first mission I seen a 24 get hit, blow right up. Didn’t see no parachutes, probably one. That’s it. I seen a lot of them blow up, one after the other.

KB: Did it scare you?

JA: No. It didn’t scare me, no. I was scared last mission! I wanted to make it. On the last mission I went on, it was a milk run somewhere in Italy and I was grounded. I come on home.

KB: Was your unit a tight-knit group?

JA: Oh yeah! Well, I tell you; we had six men in a tent and four officers in a tent. But you didn’t know who lived in that tent next door, because they didn’t want you to make friends, see? Because maybe you went on a mission, and that tent’s empty, right? So you don’t know who they was, so you’re not so “My buddy got killed!” No. There ain’t no such a thing. You kept to your own self. And you, an operations officer, and a doctor, and a flight surgeon, and a cook, and maybe another guy or two, that’s it, and the flight chief... You didn’t know too many people. They didn’t want you to know too many people. Because people... Just like you see on t.v. every once and a while, like that Memphis Belle thing, you know. They don’t want you to know nobody.

KB: Were they trying to keep you like, detached from other people? So you didn’t get like...

JA: Well, they didn’t want us to. Because like I say, if I knew that guy, next tent, real good and he got shot down, like “My buddy got shot!” So you, they didn’t want you to know nobody.

KB: How many missions did you participate in?

JA: 50.

KB: Because that was your quota?

JA: Yeah, that’s the quota.

KB: You mentioned on the paper that you saw your brother in Italy?

JA: Oh yeah. I met him, I was going to R & R, Isle of Capri, and I found out he was in the area. Well, it took me all day, I found him and we had a hell of a celebration! We got drunk. [laughs] He was my younger brother. He was with Patton, “Blood and Guts” Patton. He went all the way from North Africa to Berlin.

KB: How was it for you to see somebody you knew?

JA: Oh yeah. It was exciting!

KB: How was your everyday life? Did you have a routine that you guys went through?

JA: Well, you didn’t have much to do. You might go downtown. There was nothing much downtown, and uh... But we flew most every day, really. Sometimes, bad weather, we didn’t fly. But we was busy flying all the time. Get up at 4:30 in the morning, and you know, and go to that briefing and then you’d get on the airplane and take off. You hoped you took off.

KB: Why? Was there...

JA: Well, I’ll tell you, on takeoff, we blew one of the main tires. One of the tires on the left side. We wasn’t even up to airspeed yet and we was carrying thousand pound bombs, I think. We went right through a wheat field, stopped. Another one, was it before me, or after us? Took off, it blew a tire too, but he blew up and before you knew it the smoke was up 10,000 feet in the air. I seen that. Blew right up! We was on a gravel runway, you know? And we’re carrying an awful heavy load, those stones go right through the tires.

KB: What were your responsibilities during the war?

JA: Well, like I said, I was a flight engineer. I was like second in command more or less. When the pilot asked me, what’s wrong with this engine, what’s wrong with this and that, it was up to me to tell him what I could do to fix it, on the flight, you know? I don’t work on the ground, but just on the flight. That was my duty. And I flew in the ball turret underneath the airplane. I liked that. That was my baby. I could see everything. I could go round and round and see everything. See the bombs falling, hitting the target. You know.

TW: Ok. Originally you were an upper turret gunner but swapped...

JA: No, upper turret was assistant flight engineer. That was my station. But the flight, he was a big guy, so I told him, “You take my turret, and I’m gonna take...” He’s supposed

to take the ball turret. So I took the ball turret, because I was smaller. He was about six feet tall, so he had the top turret.

KB: What kind... was the view good? From the ball turret?

JA: Oh, I could see everything.

KB: You could see everything?

JA: I seen more... B-24s and 17s blow up and Jesus Christopher, I tell you. But that's war. On one mission, I didn't know then, we lost 70 bombers on one mission. That's ten guys in each airplane! Besides that, the Air Force lost more people than the Army and the Marine Corps put together. That's a proven fact, I guess.

KB: How did you keep in touch with those at home?

JA: Well, I wrote once and a while. Then my brother, while he was still there. But that's about it. Heck, I was gone for four years before I come home. Nearly. I went in in 1939, I come home in January, '43, first time.

KB: How often did you get R & R?

JA: Just that one time. We was supposed to go for a week, well they cut us off. We only had three days. Because they're getting short on crews.

KB: What was the food like?

JA: Food? Oh, it was, at first we had what you call K-rations, come in a little box like a Cracker Jack box. Had breakfast, dinner, lunch or whatever. Some had ham and egg, this and that, I forget what all. But we had that for a long time before we could get any, you know, any good food. Take what you want. We even had hardtack, WWI to eat. [laughs] Finally we got some C-rations. I was already ready to go home when the C-rations come. Boy that was something else.

KB: What is C-rations?

JA: Well, that's, comes in a can, all cooked up. The other stuff we had was K-rations, everything dry.

KB: What kind of supplies did you have?

JA: Supplies we had? What do you mean?

KB: Well, like for sleeping and stuff like that.

JA: Oh. We slept in a tent. We had a six man tent. Each one had a cot, and you had to scrounge around for heat. We made our own stove so we could keep warm. We didn't have... toilet facilities, that was up the street there with the slick truck, that's all. The shower was across, was a mile about from our base across the runway and only got cold water so nobody... used to take a shower in your helmet, just washed off.

KB: Were there any specific supplies you needed for the ball turrets?

JA: No, just ammunition.

KB: What was your most memorable experience of the war?

JA: I don't know. Well, for one thing I met my brother. We all come back. No Purple Hearts. All five. All five come back at the same time.

KB: Why was seeing your brother your most memorable experience?

JA: Well, who else you going to find? Your own brother way out there in Italy.

KB: What people do you remember most from the service?

JA: Well, my crew mostly. My crew, and my CO, and maybe a couple more, but not too many. All my crew, I think, all but four of us have croaked, I think. But I don't know where three are. I don't get no response from them. Most of them are dead. Six of us are dead. And we're the only, I think, we're the only crew, besides there's another crew that I heard flew 50 missions together. The whole darn group. So that's something.

Oh yeah, you can put this in your archive. I'm waiting for my DFC which I should've got in 1945, but I haven't gotten it yet. That's the Distinguished Flying Cross. A battle, a major battle, the Air Force said, flew 50 missions, that's only a couple missions. So they denied my DFC. So I'm still working on it. That's a high honor. I even wrote to [unclear]. I ain't heard nothing from him.

KB: Why do you remember them so well, or how do you remember them so well?

JA: I got a pretty good memory. I can remember a lot of stuff. But I tell you, if I had to do it again, I'd do it.

KB: Would you feel obligated to do it, or would you just do it...

JA: I [unclear] the dadgum service, they wanted something, I'd go.

KB: How did you feel about the war at the time that you were in the service?

JA: Well, I tell you. If we didn't win the war, you know what would've happened. We'd have had the Japs here, or the Germans here and we wouldn't have no freedom. We ain't got much freedom now anyhow, the way the government is running.

KB: Why did you leave the service?

JA: Leave it? Well, they told me I could go home, so I went. I had a lot of points. You were discharged on points then. I had, I don't know, a couple of hundred points and I was in Colorado, Peterson Field, Colorado and some guy come running up to my barracks and said, "Mr. Andrecheck, Sergeant Andrecheck," he said, "Orderly office wants to see you." So I went down there, they said, "Pack your bags, you're getting discharged." So I went to Fort Dix and got discharged, May 30, 1945. But I never regret getting in the service. I'm Regular Army. Army Air Force, Regular Army. I only got seven digits in my, what do you call it? My serial number - 6977016. I remember that alright.

KB: What were your opinions of the war when you left?

JA: Well, I watched it, you know, when I was in the States. I was hoping we were going to win, because we'd never lost a war. We nearly lost the war. But I guess we made out alright. We had to win. We couldn't lose.

KB: Did you leave at the end of the war or before the war ended?

JA: Well, I think the war in Europe was just over when I got out. Roosevelt died, I think. Too bad he didn't live long enough to see what happened. Yeah, I got, I think, the Japanese war was still going on. I got out just about, you know, at the time the war was over. I forget what day and month the war was over.

KB: Did you learn anything from your time in service that you were able to apply to your everyday life?

JA: Well, one thing you learned a little bit of respect and discipline. You toed the mark, or you'd be in the hoosegow. Glad I, yeah, you had to be... That's what's the trouble today. The people, I always said, when you graduate from high school, you're 18 years old, they ought to put you in the service for two years. You wouldn't have all the trouble we've got with kids today. That's my opinion. They'd have discipline and respect for everybody. But today, I don't know. They're in the service for three or four months and get a 30 day furlough. That's not...

KB: Is that when you learned all your respect, you think?

JA: I didn't take no furlough, at all. I had a convalescent furlough, that's it. I didn't have to go overseas if I didn't want to, but I did. I could have stayed stateside, but I didn't want to leave my crew. So I went to Italy.

KB: What did you do when you returned home?

JA: Well, I worked on a farm for a while, and then I went into the trucking business for a while. Then I started working for a private contractor, like building roads. I was an operator, like bulldozers and this and that. Operator, front end loader. For 30 years I done that. I retired at age 65.

KB: Did your involvement in WWII affect your occupations after the war?

JA: No, I talk about this war all the time because a lot of people, I know some guys won't say nothing about the world war. Because people got to know about the WWII. They don't even teach it in school, do they? So, they ask me, I tell them. I tell them straight out.

KB: Did you become involved in any WWII organizations?

JA: Just the American Legion. Post 616. Well, when I come back from Panama, we landed in Tucson, Arizona. Davis Monthan Field. So one day, there was over 100 of us. We went to the VFW in Tucson, we joined up. 1943 we joined up. I still got the card at home. I don't pay no dues, but after we joined, a whole bunch of us joined. I belonged to this post here over 55 years.

KB: Have you attended any reunions?

JA: Yeah, two. See most of the reunions are too far away. I went to Massachusetts and Niagara Falls.

KB: Did you see anyone you knew?

JA: No. No, I didn't see nobody I knew. Oh, yeah, I did once, my waist gunner. I met him, but he died shortly after that. I met two waist gunners. I met them but next year, they passed away.

KB: Did you keep in touch with anyone from the war?

JA: My skipper and his wife, until he died. And Jack Miller, he's from Tennessee. He died a couple of years ago. I used to call him up. He was the tail gunner. But the other guys, gone. The other guys, I don't know where they was.

KB: You mentioned on the paper that the skipper was one of the most memorable people that you knew. And I was just wondering...

JA: He was. Before the war he was a John Deere mechanic. But he was a pilot. We landed with that flat tire. Big tire on the left, we landed. We landed on this tire and the nose wheel, and we made a perfect landing. Most of these pilots, they don't know how to do that. They'd just go in a spin and blow up. I was right there with them.

KB: Is that why you respected them so much?

JA: Oh, he was a good man.

KB: How did the military change or influence your life?

JA: Well, the military, it was all right. I have no regrets. They teach you something. You had good food to eat while you was in the States, you know. And overseas there, you had to do what you could do, it wasn't a rose garden, you know. Whatever you could steal. We stole a 30 gallon drum, made a furnace out of it, a stove out of it, and we got some German gas and hooked it up with a steel, copper pipe somewhere with a valve on it, we had a fire, heat our tent. It was cold.

KB: Does the time you spent in the military often come up in your thoughts?

JA: Oh yeah. I think about it sometimes. You know, this and that. What am I going to say or something. Like I was wondering what am I going to say here today, you know?

KB: Does it bring back good memories?

JA: Oh yeah. It's all good memories.

KB: When do you think about it the most?

JA: I don't know. Just everything in general. Sometimes I think about a flight that I was in that made it home, you know. Like the one time, the skipper said we were ready to bail out. I looked down there, we were shot up pretty bad, and I looked down there and I said, "Jeez, we ain't going to bail out here! That's all water down there!" I guess that's only like 4 or 5 foot deep, but boy I tell you... But we made it home anyway. Stuff like that.

KB: Did you receive any medals for your service?

JA: There's the medals [points]. I got 14 Air Medals there, and Presidential Citation, whatever there is and the state of New York gave me those medals for whatever the thing says there. I got that a couple of years ago, hung them.

KB: What do they represent?

JA: What? Well, valor and good... I don't know. Valor mostly, and respect, I guess. And you're doing your duty to your country.

KB: And overall what does the military mean to you, or your time in service mean to you?

JA: Well, we've got to have the military, regardless. I like the military, and I like the Air Force. We've got to have everything, because if we don't, they're going to come over here and spank us. They're trying. They're trying like crazy. We can't let that happen.