

**Robert Herman Meyer  
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke & Mike Russert  
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on 25 February 2003  
Hampton Inn  
Commack, New York**

**Q:** This is an interview with Robert Meyer in the Hampton Inn, Commack, New York. It is February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2003. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke. It's approximately 11:00AM. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth please.

**RM:** Robert Meyer. Date of birth December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1921.

**Q:** Place of birth.

**RM:** Place of birth was New York City.

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

**RM:** I went through grade school, of course, then I went to Stuyvesant High School in New York City. After the war, I went to New York University.

**Q:** Were you drafted or did you enlist?

**RM:** No, I enlisted. There were four of us. I was working for the Federal Reserve Bank at the time and four of us enlisted in the Army Air Corps at the time. We all wanted to be on the same crew but, unfortunately, we all enlisted and we never saw each other again.

**Q:** Could you tell me where you were and what you remember your reactions to Pearl Harbor when you heard about it?

**RM:** I was in Woodside, New York and I was at a playground and someone came up and said that we had been bombed at Pearl Harbor. I thought at that time that we all were going to be in the army.

**Q:** Why did you select the Air Corps?

**RM:** At the time, the Air Force was just beginning to become publicized. I always wanted to be a navigator. As I mentioned before, the four of us, two wanted to be pilots, one wanted to be a bombardier and I wanted to be a navigator. That's why we thought we would be as a crew.

**Q:** Why don't you tell us your story from the time you entered service to the time you left them. Where did you receive you basic training?

**RM:** Basic training I received in Houston, Texas at Ellington Field. From the basic training, I went to navigation school in San Marcos, Texas. Upon graduation from

navigation school, I was sent to Seattle, Washington where we assembled as a crew. From the area - we were there for about two and a half to three months – we flew in that area.

We had one long range mission down to Salt Lake City. Following that, the crew was given its orders to pick up a plane at St. Louis, Missouri. We went by train to St. Louis, picked up our B-17 and after a few days of flying around with it and doing various tests, we were given our orders to go overseas to England.

We went from St. Louis to Gary, Indiana, from Gary, Indiana to Presque Isle, Maine, from Presque Isle up to Goose Bay, Canada up near the Hudson Bay. We were there for four or five days. We flew to Iceland. At Iceland, we were there for about nine days. From Iceland, we went down to Northern Ireland just around Belfast. From Belfast, a B-17 came over and we all followed that B-17 into England. The dropped us off at various places. We went to Grafton Underwood which was our base over in England.

**Q:** Did you crew stay together?

**RM:** Our crew stayed together for the whole tour. We lost our ball turret operator on a mission. We went to Kiel and somehow he fell out of the ball turret. What happened we had dropped our bombs and we were over the North Sea. If the ball turret did not move it would automatically come up into the plane where you could take the operator out just in the event that he was wounded.

That happened and the waist gunner said the ball turret had come up into the ship there and the pilot said check him out, see what happened. They opened it up and he was not in there. We were flying at 26,000 feet. The pilot told me to take a fix, where were we? I told him we were over the North Sea and we knew he didn't have a chance. He had no chute on.

What had happened was that had apparently gotten sick. He had thrown up in to his oxygen mask. We think that that cut off his oxygen and he became, he got this anoxia where he got very light headed and he must have thought he was inside the ship and opened the rear escape hatch and he must have been sucked out. That's the only explanation that we have for that.

**Q:** Did you keep the same plane?

**RM:** No. We flew different ships there.

**Q:** So, you never named a plane?

**RM:** We had one for several times. We named it *Stella*.

**Q:** Where did that come from?

**RM:** That was my aunt. We just named it *Stella*. There was a lot of odd names in those days.

**Q:** Did you ever decorate the nose of the plane at all?

**RM:** No.

**Q:** Did you ever decorate your jackets?

**RM:** No but the only thing I could say about decorating was that I flew with number 13 on my back. I just felt that I was going to defy the odds and fly with 13 on my flight suit.

**Q:** Do you still have your flight jacket?

**RM:** No I don't. I should have kept it because I understand that its quite valuable. We get a lot of literature asking if we have anything like uniforms although I have some uniforms at home.

**Q:** How many missions did you fly?

**RM:** I flew twenty seven and the rest of the crew flew twenty eight. I flew twenty seven because I had an extra mission in there. When they were changing the number of missions from twenty five to thirty, I had that extra mission so they gave me one less.

**Q:** Where were most of your missions? Into Germany?

**RM:** We flew all over. We flew to Norway, to Brussels, Belgium, France a number of times. Germany was our main target but we did fly to other countries as well.

**Q:** What kind of targets did you go after in Norway?

**RM:** That was an interesting mission. Actually, it was our first mission. It was a very exciting one for all of us because we went to Knaben, Norway which was a Molybdenum mine that the Germans needed in their manufacture of steel. They needed it to harden the steel and apparently it was an element that they needed quite badly. They got it from Knaben.

We went there. We went over the target about eight times. We eventually bombed it and we had some good results but just assessing the situation, the co-pilot came out with the fact that our Tokyo tanks, our wing tanks, the transfer valves had frozen. They didn't have access to the gas in the wing tanks.

So, they gave me my first big decision. They said can we make it back home because it was quite a lengthy mission. It was an eleven hour mission actually. Sweden was only two hundred miles away. We could have gone to Sweden and probably been interred for the rest of the war or whatever. I calculated our consumption and said well we can make it back.

We left the group and we came back alone. I charted a course for Scotland up at Newcastle. We started out and went over the North Sea. We dropped to a low level. We were only a couple of hundred feet off the North Sea. We were going along and going along. The co-pilot came down and said you know we were getting low on gas. I said ok we should be there not too long.

Finally, the red lights in the cockpit there went on indicating that we had twenty minutes of gas left and we're still over the North Sea. I was starting to sweat it out. We came through a cloud bank. When we burst through the cloud bank up ahead was land. I said oh boy that was it.

We went into Newcastle. That was a fairly good mission for me. It was my first mission so I was really a little nervous about it but we landed and as we were taxiing around we were running out of gas. The engines were sputtering. So, it was very, very close. In fact, we stayed there. We had a meal there and then we flew down to our base down in the Midlands. We got back later that night.

The next morning, I went out to look for my bicycle and they had already sold my bicycle. They didn't think we had made it back you know. It was very interesting though.

**Q:** Tell us about that mission that you had were you mentioned that you had over fifty holes in the aircraft.

**RM:** That was a mission to Bremen and we received a great deal of flak. As I was mentioning to Wayne, when we went on IP – the Initial Point – and the bombardier took over the airplane we had to stay on that particular course until we dropped our bombs.

Generally, you could look out and see. I was in the front portion of the ship and we could look out through the glass turret. We looked out and there was just a black cloud up ahead. We knew that the Germans had our altitude because they used to have planes flying on the side there I think radioing below to the anti-aircraft gunners what was taking place. We knew that we were going to go through this black cloud and we had quite a few bursts there. When we came home that night, we went around the ship there and we counted fifty seven holes in the ship but nobody was hurt and the ship wasn't damaged there as far as our being able to fly it.

**Q:** Did you fly on any of the daylight raids into Berlin?

**RM:** Oh yes. We went twice into Berlin. Each time there were quite a few planes lost. They'd lose forty or fifty planes. I think the one mission we went on there, they lost sixty planes. That was out of a fairly large number like a thousand or so.

**Q:** Did you have a bomb site on your plane?

**RM:** When we became squadron leaders, we had a bomb site. From the twelfth mission on, we had bomb sites. Other than that, we used to pattern bomb and we would drop our bombs on the lead ship when the lead ship dropped their bombs.

**Q:** Are there any other raids you want to...

**RM:** Well, there was one other raid that was really exciting. There again, we had gone to Bremen. The pilot, when they were approaching the IP, the Initial Point, they knew we

would go through flak so they had these flak jackets that they put over themselves to protect them from any shrapnel that might hit the plane.

In doing so, he kinked his oxygen mask and he passed out. He too got this anoxia where he had a lack of oxygen. The co-pilot looked over and he saw that the pilot had passed out. He started yelling over the intercom. I couldn't understand him. A lot of the crew members couldn't understand them but the bombardier understood him. He was in front there in the cabin where I was.

He tore off his oxygen mask and went by me and up to the compartment through the alley way there to where the pilots were to help the pilot survive. He had no oxygen on either. You could only last a couple of minutes at that altitude. We were at twenty six thousand feet.

So, he revived the pilot and then he started passing out. They revived him up there and then they shoved him down into the alley way. I looked and I saw him and grabbed him by the parachute harness and dragged him up front, got his oxygen mask, gave him full oxygen, revived him.

All the time this is going on, we had left the group. We were alone and it was a dangerous place to be over Germany there and you were flying alone because a lot of fighters were around. They were looking for single ships.

The pilots decided to go down below down to a cloud cover. We didn't know quite what the altitude was. It turned out to be just off the ground. It was only a couple of hundred feet above the ground. A very low level cloud bank. We flew at a couple of hundred feet above the ground across Holland and, as I was telling Wayne before, the fellas were waving to people. People saw this B-17. I remember, we looked and we saw a train and people in the train looked up and saw. It was really almost exciting for us if we hadn't really nervous about getting back home.

At the coast line, apparently the Germans had machine guns and other armament around the coast line and they shot at us. They put a couple of holes in our ship but we shot back and continued on.

We wanted to hit the low level to stay out of the radar range. We went across the North Sea into England at that level and we went home. We were lucky to get back on that one.

**Q:** Did you always wear your flak jacket?

**RM:** I never wore a flak jacket. I always had it just below me. I would step around it. On the last mission I flew, I checked out about four or five flak jackets and I put them all around me to protect myself just in case.

**Q:** What were your relationships with the English people?

**RM:** We found the English people were very, very friendly. They were really a big help to the morale of the armed forces over there. In coming across from the United States, as I mentioned before we were in Iceland for about nine days. The people in Iceland were very unfriendly.

We went into town a couple of times. We went into Reykjavik. We were in Keflavik which is the station where the air base was. We went into the capital Reykjavik and people just weren't friendly at all whereas in England we went to London several times. We met people that talked to us and really gave us a boost. In fact, one time, we met this elderly gentleman. He had a top hat on. He invited us to lunch. We went into lunch into a very plush hotel there. We sat down and we spoke to him. I thought it was very good.

**Q:** You said that you suffered from frostbite?

**RM:** Yes.

**Q:** When did that occur and how?

**RM:** That occurred on the first mission when we went to Norway. It was an eleven hour mission. As I mentioned to Wayne, the connecting hose to my electric suit had been taken. Somebody borrowed it either that or I had lost it. I don't know what happened but I flew without using the electric suit. You had these blue electric suits on. Of course, you had boots on that were electric to because you plugged in the suit and gloves as well.

When I got back to the base, my feet started bothering me. I had suffered some frostbite and I went into the hospital for, I think, it was about four days.

**Q:** Do you recall your reaction to the death of President Roosevelt?

**RM:** Yes, we were saddened by that but I think we just felt everything had to go on that the war had to go on at the time.

**Q:** Did you ever go to any USO shows?

**RM:** No. Not that I can remember.

**Q:** Do you want to tell us about the reunion you had with your brother over there?

**RM:** Oh yes. In the early part of 1944, I received a letter from my mother and she had mentioned in the letter that my brother who was in the tank corps had been shipped overseas. I just felt that somehow since the United States was sending a lot of troops over to England that he would be shipped to England in order to get ready for the invasion over there.

So, I started looking for him and I found out that a triangular patch on a jacket was an indication that person was in the tank corps. So, anytime we went into town and had a drink at a bar or something like that, I would ask them where they were stationed and

they would tell me. When I had a two day pass and I would go to that outfit and ask if there was a Lieutenant Meyer around. They would tell me no.

This went on for three, three and a half months. This is the early part of '44. I kept on looking. The Saturday before Easter of 1944, I went to one base and they said yes they had a Lieutenant Meyer. I went to the Quonset hut and there he was. I found him. He was only twenty five miles from our base.

I stayed overnight with him. We had a long, long talk because we hadn't see each other for several years. He was in the army earlier than I was and he was bouncing all over the place. So was I at the time. I told him if you want you can come back to our base, I'll get my pilot and take you up in a B-17. In those days, not everybody had flown. Flying was just coming into its own.

**Q:** Had you ever flown prior to going into the service?

**RM:** No. I never had. No.

So, he got a couple jeep loads of guys. We got nine guys. We went back to our base only twenty five miles away which wasn't too bad and I got my pilot. We went down to the flight line, got a plane – there was always a plane that needed some air time – and we went up. All the guys got in the plane and they were thrilled. The first flight for every nine one of them. My brother had never been up in a plane and all of the other eight guys had never been up in a plane.

I said I know the area. We'll find your base and we'll go back there and we'll buzz it. We went back to his base and we buzzed it a couple of time. As I was telling Wayne there we were looking through the Plexiglas nose. Some of these guys were running out and they had towels wrapped around. They're looking up to see the B-17 you know. It was the talk of his outfit for a couple of months he said. They talked about their trip and their trip up in a B-17.

They went into Normandy and they were all over Europe, the Battle of the Bulge, the (Hurtgen) Forest and some of the others.

**Q:** When did you return to the states?

**RM:** Just before D-Day. I got up to Liverpool there then got on the *Mauritania*. The *Mauritania* came back alone. We went into Boston and it was just prior to D-Day. In fact, when we tried to use the telephone and they had cut off the telephones because it was too close to D-Day and they didn't want anybody calling so we had to wait.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, I came down here to Long Island and I remember stopping at Wantagh on the Long Island Railroad and someone came running up and said, "Hey soldier, they just invaded Europe". He told me about D-Day. I thought I was going out to Camp Yaphank and shipped back right overseas but I didn't

**Q:** You stayed in until November '45?

**RM:** Yes.

**Q:** What did you do?

**RM:** I went into pilot training. I got through primary. I had thirty three hours solo and got into basic but I had trouble landing. They had an AT-6 in basic training and it had a very narrow wheel span and I had trouble landing it. The instructor was very, very understanding with me because normally they washed out student pilots in about twelve hours time. He gave me eighteen hours and he said "Meyer, you're going to kill yourself if you keep on going". So, I washed out. Then, I became an instructor and I was down in Dallas/Fort Worth there – an instructor in navigation – for the rest of the time. The war ended and I came back home.

**Q:** Did you join any veterans groups when you returned or now are you a member...?

**RM:** No. Other than the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Association and then the 384<sup>th</sup> which was Bomb Group that I was at has an organization. They have reunions every couple of year. We have been to, I think, five of them. Generally, I keep in touch with my pilot and one of the waist gunners. One is in Charlotte, North Carolina and the other is up in Queensbury near Lake George. We see each other but we keep in touch by telephone.

**Q:** What is his name? Maybe we've interviewed him.

**RM:** Art Buckley.

**Q:** Have you been to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Museum?

**RM:** Yes. Several times. We go to Florida. We've been going to Florida now for the past eleven years and its just off, its in Savannah, just off I95 and we've been there several times. In fact, one of the reunion was at the Savannah (museum).

**Q:** So, you have kept in contact with some of your...

**RM:** Yes.

**Q:** Did you make use of the GI Bill?

**RM:** Yes, when I went to NYU, I went under the GI Bill so my time at NYU, I didn't have to pay for that.

**Q:** How did you find going back to school? Did you have any trouble with...?

**RM:** No. I think I had always been somewhat of a student because I had gone to navigation school and pre-flight training and all so I don't think that bothered me at all.

**Q:** Did you ever use of the 52-20 club?

**RM:** No. Never.



**Q:** Wayne, do you want to focus on this? Can you tell us about that guy (shows picture of Lt. Meyer). When was that taken?

**RM:** I'm not quite sure. I think it was taken overseas.

**Q:** Can you hold it up?

**RM:** It was taken overseas and I'm not quite sure when but many years ago and a lot of pounds ago too.

**Q:** How about this (shows another picture)?

**RM:** This is, actually, I had at home and had it blown up. In fact, when I had it blown up about three or four copies. I sent one to the pilot and one to the waist gunner. They really appreciated it.

**Q:** This is your crew that you stayed with?

**RM:** This is the crew.

**Q:** Whereabouts are you?

**RM:** I'm over here. This is Don Collins. He's the one who fell out of the airplane. This is Daniel Boone, B-O-O-N-E. He was killed over there. He flew after the crew had and he was shot down one time.

**Q:** Where is the pilot?

**RM:** The pilot is Joe Herbert. Joe Herbert. This is Frank Farthing. He's down in Florida somewhere but we lost contact with him. We don't know quite where he is. This is Joe Zebrowski. He died last year. That was taken in '43 I think.

**Q:** What was your reaction when you heard about the Atomic Bomb being dropped?

**RM:** We thought that was quite a thing because the bombs that we had dropped over the course of time they were relatively small even though they might have been thousand pound bombs or five hundred pound bombs. The Atomic Bomb was devastating. Its quite a thing to realize that so many people can be killed with just one bomb. In today's times, when we think of the situation over in Iraq, its something that's very frightening.

**Q:** Well, thank you very much for your interview.

**RM:** My pleasure.

### **BREAK IN TAPE**

**RM:** Its not in great detail (refers to a log that he kept). I've sent it all over the country actually. I sent it to my pilot and to several other people who are interested. There's the crew members on the front.

**Q:** Can you hold it up. I can zoom in on it.

**RM:** These are all the crew members.

**Q:** You kept that for your whole time while in Europe?

**RM:** Yes. These are the missions and the date that we flew them. We had two enemy aircraft credited to us. I wanted to get that in because we had some very good waist gunners.

**Q:** What mission was that?

**RM:** That was in Kiel, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1944. Our ninth mission.

**Q:** You had two planes, Messerschmitt's, do you recall?

**RM:** I'm not sure.

**Q:** OK. I've got it.

**RM:** It tells in here, you know, the brief description of the mission.

**Q:** What was your last mission like?

**RM:** It was a milk run.

**Q:** That's good.

**RM:** It was up and down. It was just like going to Kennedy Airport and taking a plane and coming back. But the last mission of the crew, of course, I was very concerned about them. I went down to the flight line. I sweated them out them coming back. I was down at the flight line there waiting for them to come back. I was counting the planes as they were landing.

**Q:** It must have been quite a reunion.

**RM:** It was just something that we all made it. Not all of us unfortunately.

**Q:** Would you mind if I tried to get a copy of this to put in your folder?

**RM:** No, not at all.

**Q:** I will see if they copy this for us downstairs.

**RM:** Alright