Richard Varney Sr.
Veteran

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Interviewer

New York State Military Museum
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ET: Today I'm here to interview Mr. Dick Varney at his house in Hudson Falls. Mr. Varney was a World War II, B-24 flight engineer, and today is December 16, 2003. Where were you on December 7, 1941?
RV: I was working at the Imperial [Imperial/Hercules/Ciba-Geigy] in Glens Falls.

ET: How did you get into the service?
RV: It was a shock, but it was not unexpected, believe me, because we had been heading towards it. In fact, in my opinion, while war had not been declared, we were actively in it because we were supporting England. We were giving them everything they needed. And then until Japan attacked us, we did not declare war. They attacked us and they declared war on us first, both Germany and Japan. So from then on, it was just a matter of time before we all got into it.

ET: So you weren't shocked? What were your reactions to Pearl Harbor? How did you feel?
RV: How did I feel at the time? I was outraged, naturally. It was a sneak attack with no declaration of war or anything. Japan did warn us, but by the time they got it deciphered, they had already attacked us before we even knew about it. So actually it was an undeclared war. That to me, raised everybody naturally. But I was not a kid at the time. I was thirty years old. I had no idea what was going to happen. I was married at the time, but I had no idea what the future was going to bring as far as I was concerned, because I didn't know what they wanted to do. I don't think anybody relished the idea of going to war. Nobody does, I don't think. But nevertheless, I think you had a level of patriotism at that time that you'll never see again. Certainly, we don't have it now. Everybody was behind the whole situation at that time. I don't think you heard anybody wondering whether we should go in or not, because we were in. We had several wars after that, but

none of them were a declared war as far as I'm concerned. They were called police actions and all this sort of thing. But the results were the same. People still got killed. But in retrospect, I don't know, that's so long ago now. A lot of the details are not as sharp as they should be, maybe, but I can remember most of it.

ET: How did you get into the war?
RV: I was drafted in. I think it was around April 1943. And we went through God knows how many schools, how much training to prepare us for it. That to me was, I don't know, all of it you were waiting for the time when you were sent over there, but finally we did go over there.

ET: Do you remember what you went through in training?
RV: Oh yes. First of all, you took your basic training, which was just like any Army basic training. I took that in Miami Beach. I had tough duty in Miami Beach. After that, we were assigned to air mechanic school. There I was trained for the B-24 Liberator. I was being trained as an aircraft flight engineer. My job at that time, everything mechanical on a plane was the flight engineer's responsibility. So you were taught everything about the airplane. After we graduated from there, they sent us to Panama City for air gunnery. When we came out of there, we were also classified as an armorer. So then we went to various places. We went to Westover, [Massachusetts] and from there our crew was formed. Now this crew, when it was put together, was the first time that I had met most of the enlisted men. Then I went to South Carolina, Walker [unclear] 6.35 Air Base, and there we met our pilot, copilot, navigator and bombardier. From then on, we were a unit. We stayed together. We trained together, we stayed together, on all our practice missions and everything. Then we went to…trying to think now…Virginia, Langley [Air Force Base]. From there we took radar training. That was the last duty in this part of the world. From there we flew to Goose Bay, Labrador, and from there to Iceland, and from there to Wales. We flew all the way over, still as a unit. We stayed that way. When we got there, we were assigned to our bomb group and went through more training. It was one series of training. It was all you ever did, train, train, train, train, train.

Finally, the crew got there as a unit and then we were scheduled for our first mission. And that one, as I told you, was Hamburg. It was a vital mission in the sense that Hamburg had all their oil refineries. Without that, they didn't fly, they didn't have gasoline, they diddn't have anything if you destroyed it. You certainly limited their supply. It was a very important mission. And because it was, they concentrated their aircraft and anti-aircraft guns to protect it. So, as I said, that's the one I remember.

Contrary to what some people may think, it was like a job. I don't think there were any heroes up there because you were just doing your job. You had to. You either did or you didn't come back. You didn't have enough time really to be scared a lot. I saw planes go down naturally, and the only thing you looked for was how many chutes came out of it. Because when an airplane got spinning, you couldn't get out sometimes because centrifugal force pinned you. So you couldn't get out. Some of the people didn't get out. But as I said before, I never got hurt. It was always the other guy. And the frame of mind that you had was something that most people can't understand. You saw this happen, but it was not you. It becomes an impersonal thing. It has to be because you'd go crazy if it wasn't. But you were just thankful that it wasn't you, you know. Yeah. It's hard to understand. Not that you didn't have sympathy for the people, but still, it wasn't you. I don't know how to explain it. I don't think there were too many heroes. You were doing your job. That was what you were trained to do, and that's what you did. I don't know if that helps you any or not.

ET: On the phone, you explained another mission. It was over the Rhine.
RV: Oh, I followed them. On the discharge, you'll find that our missions were all over. And they were over the Rhineland, yes, sure, and Cologne, Düsseldorf, Emden, whatever you can think of. We hit them wherever they were. In fact, we even hit Berchtesgaden. That was Hitler's retreat. And we bombed as far as Austria and Czechoslovakia. [references his papers] So, as you can see, that was the Middle Eastern campaign. And for that you have the clusters on your ribbon showing that. Each one of those means something. [shows ribbons] As you can see, this one's the air medal. That cluster, each one of them represents another air medal. And this, of course, represents another part of the theater, the Ardennes maybe, the Rhineland, and one thing or another. Today is the date, incidentally; I was looking at the calendar. This is the date that the Ardennes offensive started. The date when Hitler tried to break through to split the Allies. They were going through the First Army, and they did go through pretty well. And they stopped them at Bastogne. Have you ever seen that movie?

ET: No, I don't think so.
RV: General [Anthony] McAuliffe was the commander there. They had him pretty well surrounded and beaten. The German commander asked for his surrender. That was the very famous remark he made. [laughs] He said, "Nuts!" That's what the general said. That's all there was to it.

ET: We saw a video where he said "Nuts."

RV: Well, that actually happened. And of course, at that time Patton was racing across Europe to relieve Bastogne, and he got there. But in the meantime, we were bombing. We couldn't get off the ground for about a week when that started because it was socked in. You couldn't take off, you couldn't land. It didn't bother you once you got in the air because you didn't have to see the ground to bomb. You bombed by radar, so cloud cover didn't matter, but you did have to land. So we couldn't get off the ground, but when we did, we bombed everything in sight.

ET: What was the longest that you stayed in the air?
RV: Altitude?

ET: Yeah.
RV: Usually, most of the missions were around twenty thousand feet. It was wintertime over there. And, believe me, it was about seventy degrees minus centigrade. That was cold. But you did have heated suits and heated gloves. And of course, under those circumstances, you still had your job to do. As an engineer, I had duties. At the time. I had to check to make sure the generators were synchronized. I opened the bomb bay doors. I transferred fuel. All of these things were part of my job. I won't speak for other people. They had their own jobs. That was what I did.

ET: Did anything ever go wrong during your job?
RV: Did anything ever go wrong? [laughs] Oh, always something went wrong. Yeah, I remember one time we got ready on the IP [Initial Point]. I forget where the mission was. When they loaded the bombs, they had a propeller on the front of it and a propeller on the back of it. When you dropped them, the wind screwed the propeller off. When that propeller came off, the bomb was armed. It won't go off otherwise. When they loaded them, they were supposed to put a safety wire through it, in each thing. Well, somebody on that mission didn't put the safety wires in. So when I opened the bomb bay doors, the wind hit them. I called the pilot on the intercom and said, I got news for you. We got ten, thousand pound bombs here that are now armed. The propellers are all off. If any piece of flak came through and hit the nose of them, that'd be all she wrote. You wouldn't find anything. Didn't, though. But that was one time that I sweated a little bit. I can tell you.

ET: What did you do to fix it?
RV: You couldn't fix anything. We were on the IP. You couldn't take any evasive action. You couldn't do anything, and we were flying right through flak. But when they dropped the bombs, it was fine.

ET: What's the IP?
RV: Initial point. That's where you start your bombing. That was one system that they used. The other system was visual bombing. They had two other systems. One, you bombed by radar. The other one, I forgot what they called it, but it used radio signals. They picked a point, say in England someplace, another point as far away as they could get in England, and they put a directional beam. You flew along this leg, and this one maybe gave you signals, like da-da-dit, da-da-dit. And then this other one over here was dit-da-da, dit-da-da. So as you went, where they joined, that was your target. [gestures two lines intersecting] You didn't have to see the ground. As soon as you hit those signals together, you dropped because you were over the target. Does that make any sense to you?

ET: Yeah.
RV: Okay. Don't to me sometimes, I can tell you.

ET: Was your plane ever hit?
RV: Oh yeah, we picked up holes, sure. Flak holes. I didn't pick up any aircraft holes. But flak holes, yes. I worried more about the anti-aircraft than I did about anything else because there was no way you could defend yourself against anti-aircraft. And they generally fired it in bursts of three. They used their 88s, they called them. They had different levels. The first one was eighteen thousand five hundred feet, another one was eighteen thousand seven hundred, and so on. Three [levels], like steps. They tried to bracket through with the target. Each battery of anti aircraft was usually three guns. But they had many of those batteries. So when they started firing, you looked up ahead and thought you had a thunderstorm up there. You know what I mean?

ET: Yeah. How much damage did your plane get? Was it enough to interfere with the flying?
RV: I never lost an engine. I did lose the oil out of one when we landed. It had a hole in the oil reservoir, but the pump in it was strong enough so that I didn't lose the engine. I made sure the engines were right before we went up, as long as I had to fly in it. That's it. As I said before, I don't make that much of it because there were not many heroes up there. You were doing your job, that was all. But for flying personnel, we had the highest rate of casualties of any branch of the service. Because there were no foxholes up there. There was no place to hide. That's it.

ET: Did anyone ever get hurt on board?

RV: Not on my ship. There was a bomb group that was short a copilot and a tail gunner. We weren't scheduled to fly that day, so from our crew, they assigned them to that other aircraft from the other group. They both got shot down. They didn't come back. Those were the only people we lost in our crew.

ET: What did you and your buddies talk about?
RV: Well, that's hard to say. You didn't do too much worrying because it's something that you were trained to do and you had to do it. You were busy taking care of the duties of the job. You didn't have much time to think about anything else. You always wondered, of course. It crossed your mind naturally. Why wouldn't it? When you looked out the side window and saw a plane going down, naturally you wondered. But as far as that, that was all there was to it. I mean, what I liked about the Air Corps was, it was hazardous, naturally, but if you went over and came back, you had a place to sleep. You weren't like an infantryman sleeping in a foxhole. But outside of that, no, I can't say that. As I said, I don't think there were many heroes flying up there. Because what were you going to do if you didn't like it? Were you going to get out and walk? You went where the plane went. That was all there was to it, and that's it. I can't say you take a lot of credit for that. The only thing that you can take credit for was being able to function under those conditions. It was seventy degrees minus centigrade and you had to work. If you took your gloves off, they wouldn't be off for two minutes before your hands froze. Outside of that, that was a part of it.

ET: Did the heat in your suit ever malfunction?
RV: [laughs] There isn't anything ever made by man that didn't malfunction at some time. But not very often.

ET: Did it ever happen to you?
RV: Not very often, because you tested them before you went up. If you had any brains, you tested it. And your oxygen, you had to have oxygen. You went on oxygen at ten thousand feet. From ten thousand feet on up, you stayed on oxygen. Otherwise, anoxia is a horrible thing. If you didn't have oxygen at twenty thousand feet, you passed out and you would never know it. It's amazing that you wouldn't even know it. You'd just go to sleep and that would be it. If anything happened to your oxygen supply, and you didn't know it, that could happen. But like anything made by man, sure, it malfunctioned occasionally. Anything does. We didn't have the technology in those days that you've got now. Our protection was the skin of a piece of aluminum that was about that thick. [gestures about an inch] That was it. Those planes were all aluminum except for the engines, of course. They didn't provide much protection. We had flak suits, flak vests

they called them. I always used mine to sit on because that was where the flak was coming from. [laughs] But they were very heavy, very cumbersome. And of course the gloves were heavy too. The suit was heavy, as you can see from that picture what they looked like. [points to a photo off camera] But outside of that, as much as I can tell you, we went over and came back, if you were lucky. And if you weren't, you didn't come back.

ET: Did you have any siblings in the war? Siblings, brothers or sisters, who helped out in the war?
RV: I had a brother who went in later in the war, but I don't think he had any combat service. He's dead now, incidentally. I had one brother, yes, he did. He did have some military service. Younger brother.

ET: What did your parents think of you going into the war?
RV: Well, my father wasn't alive, he died when he was forty four years old. My mother, well, what could she say? There were five children in the family. Three of us are left, two sisters and me. I was the oldest. My mother passed away a long time ago now. Incidentally, that was my band up there.

ET: Did you do that after the war?
RV: Oh, I had that before the war. I started playing at dances when I was about seventeen. On violin. I taught myself to play. I took lessons for a little while on the violin, but then I played by ear from then on. I taught myself to play saxophone, an alto and a tenor, which I still have. I played at dances for a long, long time. A lot of fun. It was quite necessary then, because wages weren't then what they are now.

You have to realize that when I went to work at Imperial. If you weren't late, forget to ring in or out, you got forty cents an hour. Can you imagine that? You worked forty hours, you got sixteen dollars a week. Now on that, you had a family to support. It isn't like it is today. But I did a lot of reading and I'm not senile. I'm educated far beyond my formal education. I've had college courses at Hudson Valley Community College and management courses. I worked my way up. So when I retired, I was an area supervisor. I had seventeen foremen and, I don't know, a couple hundred men working for me. But I did that myself. I'm quite proud of that. I did it by myself. I didn't have any formal education, but I didn't feel inferior to anybody, and I still don't.

ET: It's an accomplishment.

RV: I'm proud of it. Yeah. Because I did this on my own. I mean, today you can't become a janitor unless you got a high school education, I guess. I forget the name of the financier who owned a bank, and he never even graduated from elementary school. One of the questions he was asked was, Don't you regret the fact that you didn't have a good formal education? Just think how far you could've gone. He said, Yeah, I could probably qualify for a janitor job in my bank. And he was right. Maybe now because I haven't got it, but I think education is a wonderful thing. But it doesn't make a poor person good. You've got to do something with it. It's only a license to practice. Unless you do something with it, it isn't worth a nickel. Do you agree with me?

ET: Yeah, it's true.
RV: A lot of people graduate from high school and can't read their diploma. And they can't make change for a dollar. I blame this basically on these things. [holds up a calculator]

ET: Calculator?
RV: I wouldn't allow them in an elementary school if it was me. I'd make them use their head. Because if the battery goes out, most of these kids, they can't do anything. Do you agree with me?

ET: Yeah, it's true.
RV: The basic education to me is getting the elementary thing, being able to add one and one and come up with something other than three. I don't know, but that's me.

ET: Even though it was during wartime, do you have any happy or fond memories during that time?
RV: Not very many because, well, I had my wife, naturally, but I didn't have any children until after I got out of the service. I do have a picture of my family. I had a son and a daughter. The daughter was a school teacher. I put her through college. I have a son who attended Utica Community College. He is a contractor now, doing very well. So both of them did really well. My daughter died when she was twenty four. She had cancer. It killed her. That was bad. She had a child that lived one day. That was the only grandchild I had, to my regret. My son didn't give me any grandchildren, and he won't. I can tell that now. It's getting too late now, because he's fifty years old now. I never thought I'd live to see him grow up, because the men in my family don't usually live long. I seem to be the exception. Thank God I'm not senile though. I lost my wife in 1982, and I've been living here alone since then. You can probably tell that just by looking around. Do you want to know what time it is? [points around the room to the many clocks]

ET: You were married to your wife while you were in the war?
RV: Before that. I was married to my wife in 1936.

ET: So did you write to her while you were in?
RV: Every day. Every day? Every day. Oh yes. She was a wonderful girl. She was too good for me, but she was a wonderful girl.

ET: Do you remember what the food was like?
RV: I ought to remember. I cooked it. Yes, I'm a good cook, believe it or not. My wife liked my cooking better than she liked her own. Yes, I know what the food was like, but the difference is you didn't eat a lot of prepared food. You cooked your own. You ate a lot of things that probably you wouldn't. You went out and picked dandelions, Did you ever eat them?

ET: Yeah, I think I tried.
RV: I don't think you'd like them too well. They're kind of bitter. You don't like them?

ET: I like them.
RV: We used to go and pick them and clean them, cook them. You made do. You didn't always have money. With those kinds of wages, you didn't have money, especially when you were buying a home, trying to keep a car. Of course, the homes were a lot cheaper then. Not relatively. A thousand dollars in those days was equal to at least five thousand or ten thousand dollars today, as far as what you could buy with it. I grew up during the Depression. In the Depression era, you could buy a home like this for fifteen hundred dollars. You couldn't hang a door for that now. But money was something that you didn't have, but you didn't feel deprived in those days because nobody else had any money. You probably had one change of clothes, one pair of shoes maybe, if you were lucky. And you didn't wear them in the summer because you didn't want to wear them out. I'm not exaggerating. Because you just didn't have the money. But you made do.

ET: Was that in the Depression?
RV: Oh yes, 1929. I remember that day very well.

ET: How old were you?
RV: About seventeen or eighteen. I had been working for two years. I went to work at fifteen years old with working papers. I worked in the silk mill, Haskell Avenue, Glens Falls. That's not there now. And I never went back to school. I had graduated. My

parents, God bless them, grew up in an era when school was not that important. Making a living was important. You went to work as soon as you were able to help the family. I don't know if people under [age] fifty [who] can understand what that meant, because it meant a lot. But I wish that I had gone to school. I did later on, but I made it without it. I had to do it my way. Even without an education, I can still talk with you on most any subject. I won't say that on any technical subject. Computers to me are a complete mystery. I never used them. But I think I could handle it. But it's not necessary now. Now I don't care. For whatever time I have left, I'm gonna take it as it comes. I'm gonna enjoy myself. Does that make any sense to you?

ET: Yeah.
RV: I have my problems, physical problems, naturally. I have a touch of high blood pressure and borderline sugar. Both of them are borderline. I have to watch my diet, and I do, I see food and I eat it. [laughs] So that's my diet. I figure I got this far doing what I wanted to do, I think I can go the rest of the way.

ET: During the war, what kind of food rations did you have? What did you do for meals?
RV: You ate in the mess halls. If you got back, you did. The only time I saw C-rations was on the way over. We had a case of them on our plane, and if we felt hungry, we ate them. But those were about the only C-rations. That was one of the good things about the Air Force. You got hot food.

Incidentally, for a mission, they generally posted it. But then you had what they called a CQ, Charge of Quarters. They came along and shook you about four o'clock in the morning. Blackout, you know, and you had to get ready to go on a mission. Well, that was when my day started. You may not have taken off until eight o'clock, but you went and got your breakfast. I went out and pre-flighted my plane, checked it all over. You went to your briefing and they explained where the target was and how you were going to get there. They explained the route they picked out to eliminate as much flak interference as possible. They told you all this sort of stuff. After you pre-flighted the plane, your crew assembled, you got in the plane, and took off. You went up and circled around until you got all the other elements for that particular group. Each squadron was color-coded. You fired your color code and the other planes saw that and they joined you. When you got all assembled, you took off over the Channel. Then you started really climbing to altitude. That was the description. From then on, nothing else mattered because you were busy.

ET: Did you know what you were bombing?

RV: Oh yes, they told us that before we went. When we came back, they did a debriefing. The first thing they did was give you about three ounces of Irish whiskey. Now the beautiful part of that was I had six members of our crew that didn't drink, so I always brought my canteen with me. They took their whiskey, and poured it in my canteen. I shouldn't tell you that, but it's true. Incidentally, the bombardier became an Episcopalian minister. His name was Marshall V. Minister, and he became a minister. He sent me an invitation when he was going to be sworn in or whatever you call it. I didn't go. We were going to have a get together. It was supposed to be in North Carolina, but it was going to be expensive, so a few of them cancelled, so they called it off. I wanted to go to that one. Never heard very much from them. I heard from my first pilot, when he was getting married. He became operations officer of the squadron, so they assigned us another pilot. We were lead crew from our 7th mission on.

I've explained to you how I felt one thing or another. I don't feel that you were doing anything heroic or anything like that. You were doing a job. But the job, of course, did have risks. Statistics will show you, if you read any of them, you'll find out that they certainly did. Anything else I can help you with?

ET: On the phone you said about the bridges over the Rhine. About how there were people who were close enough to throw rocks at your plane. Can you explain that?
RV: That was another mission that I remember. The Bridge at Remagen, that's when they established a bridgehead across the Rhine. It was only about a quarter mile deep. Two hundred fifty Liberators were set up for this mission, and we had no bombs. We had wicker baskets full of ammunition and supplies, food, and one thing or another. We flew that mission over the Rhine at about five hundred feet in the air, right down on their deck. [laughs] They were throwing rocks at us, we were so low. We were the lead crew on that mission. Everybody that was anybody in the squadron wanted to go on that mission, all the big wheels. So you could have had a full colonel as a co-pilot or something like that because all the brass wanted to go, you know. We dropped those baskets of supplies in that perimeter. And they were so low, half the time the chutes didn't fully open. They hit the ground and started bounding across. You saw people running for dear life everywhere you looked. I remember that one. We lost twenty five planes in that mission. Because before we even turned, we were over the German lines. And they threw everything at us. Fortunately, I was the lead plane, so they shot at us first, but it hit the plane in the back of me, I imagine. I wasn't too concerned about it at the time. But that was funny. I remember that one. That's part of history, the Bridge at Remagen. You know that. We took that bridge. We didn't, [points to himself] but the ground troops did.

ET: How do you feel toward the enemy today?
RV: Germans?

ET: Yeah.
RV: Well, I don't blame them. They're like us. They were ordered to do something. What choice did they have? Some of them were a little more…the SS troops, they were strictly Nazis, right to the core. I didn't think too much of them, but the Wehrmacht were just people just like you and I. They didn't care that much for it. I had a British Lieutenant Colonel I was talking to in London. That was the period when they were bombing London with the V-2s, the rocket bomb. It went up in the air and then came down. A big sign on the building fell down and I stood there looking at it and this Colonel was looking at it too. I said, Boy, they got that one. He said, Yeah, that happened the day before, but it was weak and it finally fell down. It fell down on the bus. He said, Yankee, What do you think about when you're dropping your bombs? I said, I don't think anything about it. I never see it. It's impersonal to me. But I know that we've probably killed a lot of innocent people, women and children. They didn't do nothing. I kind of feel sorry for them. He said, Why? I said, My God, they didn't do anything. He said, No. But remember something. Out of their bellies is going to come the guy that's going to kill my son twenty years from now. That was their view because that happened to Britain. Twenty years apart, were World War I and World War II. So he had no sympathy for them at all. That was the way the British felt about it. Of course, they took a lot more punishment than we did, remember. They had bombing and everything else you could think of. We didn't get that in this country. This country never had that. And their attitude would change a lot if they ever did, believe me. And it could happen today. With the kind of technology they have today, there's no place in this world that's out of range. We're not exactly loved in this world, and we did that ourselves. And we're still doing it. We can't run the world. I don't want to tell you my politics. But I think that jerk [George W. Bush] we got in Washington, you ought to put him in the same hole they took Hussein out of. Because Iraq never did anything to us. Nothing. They never did anything to us. You were talking about September 11th [2001]. That had nothing to do with Iraq. The people who did that were Arabs, and they were from Saudi Arabia. One of our friends. They're friends as long as we got the bucks to buy the oil. I don't know. This world is a mess right now. I don't know where the end of it is, and I hate to see it. [directs the statement at interviewer] You're the people that are growing up in this. And I hate to think what's going to happen now.

ET: Do you recall your feelings when FDR died?

RV: He was a great president. Great president. Now I see they got some jerks that want to take his name and picture off the dime and put Ronald Reagan's on it. That's what these Republicans are trying to pull now. I have no more respect for them than I do for the Nazis. What they're doing today is ridiculous. I'm not going to go into that. Anybody that can read ought to know what I'm talking about. One little thing I will say to you about why I feel this way. We had World War I, World War II, Vietnam, and Korea. You know what our national debt was at the end of that time? About one hundred thirty-five billion dollars. Then we had eight years of Reagan and four years of Bush. You know what our national debt was? Almost five trillion dollars. Do you know what a trillion dollars is? It's a one with a string of zeros from here to Albany. Nobody knows it. Now you know what this jerk is doing now? You know what it's going to be by the time he gets out of there?

ET: A lot more.
RV: Do you think it'll ever be paid?

ET: Probably not.
RV: I think right now it amounts to something like eight thousand dollars for every man, woman, and child in this country. Or more. And he's piling it up. And who is he giving it to? I don't want to get into that. You didn't want to talk about that anyway, but I get disturbed.

ET: Do you find it hard to watch documentaries on the war today? Like watching TV when they show World War II on TV.
RV: No. What I find it hard to watch it for is why are we doing it? I can’t understand it. I don't think I'm stupid. But what are we doing there? How long are we gonna be there? Can you see the end of it? It's been going on for two thousand years over there. What makes him think he can change it? You can't. I don't know what the answer is. I don't know what the end of it's going to be either. I know there's going to be a lot more people killed before it ends. They're doing something that I cannot see any American doing. Can you see an American blowing himself up? But you can find that with the Islamic religion, especially with the radicals. I wouldn't say that the vast majority of Islamic people are that way, but the radicals are. They're willing to die for it. I don't think we are.

ET: No. What do you think about Truman's decision on dropping the bomb on Japan?
RV: Well, I don't think it was necessary at the time, because Japan was already beaten. So was Germany. But I never knew of any weapon that was ever made that wasn't used. It probably did save a few hundred thousand American lives because they didn't have to invade the Japanese mainland, which would have been costly. For that part of it, maybe.

But I think that we could have done the same thing with air power because they had no defense against the B-29 anymore. No, I don't think it was really necessary, but I don't think anybody ever made any bomb that they didn't use. When they developed that, there were a lot of worries about that. Some were afraid it was even going to set the atmosphere on fire with the hydrogen in the atmosphere, one thing or another. They never knew exactly what it was going to do, but they did it. What do we have now? Now it's proliferated all over the world. And we can't stop it. Why, Truman? I don't know. We had already been at war, what, about two or three years? We lost a lot of people. So had everybody else on our side. He was going to save some of them, and I guess that was why he did it. We were the only ones that had it. We thought we were. But we had a lot of people in this country that sold us out. They gave it to Russia. Some of our own patriots. If there's a buck in it, they'll do it. I hope that answers your question.

ET: Did you like Truman as a president?
RV: Truman? Yeah. He was very direct and very honest, which is a rare commodity today. He didn't lie to us. Certainly what we've got now lies to us. He [President George W. Bush] lied to us about the reason for going into Iraq. We had no reason to go there, but he made up reasons. Personally, I think he's like a Charlie McCarthy [ventriloquist dummy] for [Vice President Dick Cheney]. I think Cheney's actually calling the shots, myself. I don't think this guy's [Bush] got brains enough. Pardon me, I don't care whether you like it or not, and I know what your politics are, but I'm telling you what I think of him. Why would we go into something where they have no idea how we're going to get out of it? We didn't learn our lesson in Vietnam? We had no business there either. Those people didn't do anything to us. My idea of America is freedom, freedom of choice, isn't it? Well, if they were satisfied with Saddam Hussein, who are we to say no? That's their country. They weren't doing anything to us. They didn't like Israel, but don't feel bad. Nine-tenths of the world don't like Israel. Certainly Russia doesn't. Certainly France doesn't. Sometimes I don't know if I do.

ET: Did you ever fly a different plane?
RV: Oh, yes. For training, but nothing that was operational as far as the war was concerned. For some of the gunnery courses in Boca Raton was where they taught us to shoot at moving objects. They had a plane towing a target, and you had to learn to lead it properly to get a shot.

ET: Did your plane have a nickname?

RV: No, I know what you're talking about. No, you leave that for the B-17s. They were the glory boys. The B-24 flew faster, carried more bombs, flew higher, but the B-17 were the glory boys.

ET: You had 10 to a crew in your plane?
RV: Ten people in our plane, the B- 24s, yes. Originally they had a ball turret on the bottom, but when we got across, they took that out and put the radar transmitter on the bottom where the belly turret was.That left the engineer free to do everything mechanical, and the assistant engineer flew the top turret in my plane.

ET: How long would a workday be? You said you got up at four thirty in the morning. How long would you be out till?
RV: Well, it all depends on where you're going, naturally. But I would say you finally took off maybe about eight o'clock in the morning, and if everything worked right, you were back by one o'clock. You were back if you came back.

ET: What did you do after?
RV: You went in and had your briefing. Then after that, they let you go and have dinner.

ET: What was your briefing?
RV: They wanted to know everything that you saw in the flight. How heavy the flak was, how many fighters were in the air, anything to do with anything. But they were more concerned with the flak than they were with anything else, and they should, because I think we lost more planes to flak than we did anything. You couldn't defend against it. But they wanted to know everything about the flight. They had the officers' debriefing in one group and the enlisted were in the other group. And they indeed got everybody's opinion on what happened. That was what they used to plan their next mission.

ET: Then you had dinner?
RV: Yeah, it was quite an experience. I'm glad I went, but I'm glad I'm not going again. Besides, I'm too old for that stuff now. I can't take it.

[looks at his papers] But, I've got to look. I don't know where they are. I know I've got some copies of this.

ET: Did you ever get souvenirs?
RV: Well, now that's a good question. Let me ask you a question. How could I reach the souvenirs from ten thousand feet in the air? [laughs]

ET: I don't know, but maybe afterwards, like when you landed.
RV: Yeah, well, after V-E Day in Europe, I was in London when they announced that the Germans had surrendered. We went back to our squadrons and loaded our planes up with ground troops, people who didn't fly, non-flying personnel. It took seven people on the ground to keep one man in the air. That was the ratio. So the people who flew were actually thirteen percent of the fighting force. They were the people that took the beating, not the people on the ground. But the people on the ground serviced your planes, loaded the bombs, rebuilt the engines, did all that sort of thing, they were ground personnel. They never flew. So after VE Day, we loaded as many of them as we could get in the bomb bays where they could see. Then we flew them at five hundred feet in the air, up the Rhine Valley so they could see the different places that we had bombed, see the railroad tracks all twisted. In Cologne, the only building that had a roof on it was the Cathedral. Everything else was nothing. And that was all the way up the whole Rhine Valley. They had a chance to see what their bombs did. But of course, a lot of them got airsick because at five hundred feet it was pretty rough because the plane bounced all over with the thermal drafts and things like that. So I gave each one of them an empty ammunition can and they asked me what for. I told them, just keep it with you, and pretty soon you won't have to ask me. You'll know.

ET: Your first time in a plane up high, did you ever get airsick?
RV: Oh no. Couldn't afford to. But what I did get, I went up one time when I had a cold and I was stone deaf for a week. You see, you could tie a balloon at ground level and it'd be about that big around, [gestures about an inch around]. When you got up to twenty thousand feet, that balloon was that big. [gestures about twelve inches round] Because the air pressure is so much less. But the air pressure inside the balloon stays the same because it can't escape. Well, that's what happens to you when you get a cold. Your saccule tubes, you can't clear them, so you can't balance the pressure in your inner ear and your outer ear. So it stretches your ear. That happened to me and it was very painful. You couldn't turn back because you couldn't abort the mission for that. That happened to me. That's why I can't hear you today, probably. I can hear you most of the time.

ET: What did you have to do after the mission for your ears when you landed?
RV: Well, they just grounded me for a week until I could hear again, and then I started to do missions. And then the stupid jerks, when I couldn't fly missions, had me out there at nighttime manning machine guns to guard the base. That was a good thing. It was cold in England in the wintertime, you know, damp. And they have a much longer day than you

do in the summer. I don't know why, they're farther north, I guess. In the wintertime, they have a longer night. People don't realize that, but it's true.

ET: So what was that like?
RV: It was damp, miserable, cold. You get used to anything. It's true, you do. What are you supposed to do? It's just like I tell people, there were no heroes up there. You did your job. You either did your job or else. Every member of that crew had a job to do and he had to do it. Because everybody depends on everybody else.

ET: Where were you when the war ended?
RV: Liverpool Street Station in London. I was just coming back from a three day leave. So I got right off the train, went right back into London and stayed three more days. [laughs] I knew I was going to catch hell, but I did it. They took care of me. When I got back to the base, they asked me if I had a good time and I said, Yes. Every day at four o'clock in the morning for two weeks, they had me flying with every pilot there was. They kept me going, I'm telling you. I didn't say a word. I shouldn't tell you that, but it's true.

ET: How did you feel when the war ended?
RV: Relieved. But, you know what? [phone interruption] What were we talking about?

ET: How did you feel when the war ended?
RV: Well, that time I felt pretty good, but that wasn't the end for us. That was only the end of the European part of it. We were still at war with Japan. So I went from there, finally we came back to this country. We landed in New Hampshire, and they transferred us to Fort Dix. Then from there we went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota to continue our training in preparation for going to Japan, or to the Pacific Theater. My graduating crew was split right in two. Half of them went to the European Theater, which we did. The other half went to the Pacific Theater. We were waiting then to see if we were going to be called to go to the Pacific Theater. But the war ended when I was in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. That was V-J Day. And then it was a matter of time trying to get out because they were demobilizing so fast that they didn't have enough bases. I went to Lincoln, Nebraska, stayed there for a while. I went to Victoria, Kansas, stayed there for a while. Finally, I wound up in Andrews Bowling Field in Maryland, and I was discharged from there. But it took quite a while, even after that, to get out.

ET: What year were you discharged?

RV: 1945. The war didn't end until 1945 in the fall. It's in here someplace. [refers to his papers] Look, fifty or fifty five years ago, my dear, I don't remember every detail.

ET: That's okay.
RV: I think I remember most things. [reads his papers] Well, this deed was recorded in October 1945. I was inducted in April. All of that's in here. And all of the battles are in here too. Not all the bases are in here though. I did have another record of that, but I can't find it. On that, they listed all of the missions and everything. And some way or another, I cannot find it. It's probably in this house someplace. But it's not necessary. I think you have most of the essentials.

ET: What medals do you have?
RV: The Air Medal with two clusters. And I have the battle stars. I showed you those. They're listed here. [refers to his papers] As I said, I had reservations about doing this because, I mean, after all, it's not a very exciting thing. Not to you. It was to me at times. I have to tell you just like it was. I'm just telling you that air combat is such an impersonal thing. It only got personal when you were flying through flak or you had a plane coming at you or something. Then it got a little bit personal. But outside of that, it wasn't. Because that was what you're trained for and that was what you were doing. And it was not an unusual occurrence. It happened at any time. So, like I said, you didn't have to be a hero. What are you going to do, get out and walk? You went where the plane went. So I don't pretend to be a hero. I'm not. I just did my job. And I was good at my job too. I made it a point to be because I wanted to know everything about that plane that I could. I never expected to fly. When I went through the airplane course to be a mechanic, at my age, I thought that was what I would be. Instead of that, I wound up in flight status and I will never know how, but I did. I was in pretty good condition physically, I guess. Not very exciting, but that is the way it was. I don't brood about it, I don't miss it, but I can remember most of it.

What's different about it, so much was the attitude of the people. It wasn't like Vietnam where you had people rioting in the streets and protesting the war and one thing or another. It wasn't like Korea, which was a forgotten war. People got killed. But why we were there is something I don't know. Vietnam, I think, was a total disaster. And then we pulled out of it. All the people who were backing us over there, they got liquidated. It was not a very pretty picture. These are the things that I remember.

Incidentally, this has nothing to do with the war, but this is part of my garage sale stuff. This is my workshop right here. This is something I didn't know. Do any of you need a

desk clock? Here are some beautiful little clocks. It keeps perfect time. In there, I've probably got twenty or more clocks in there. I fix them, that's what I love to do. Cuckoo clocks, I fix those. I keep a supply of these little bellows. That's the cuckoo. That's what makes them cuckoo.

ET: Do you have any questions?
RV: Yeah, was this all necessary? Yeah, I have questions. I was wondering, your project, I think it's good if it'll work. If it will give people an idea what went on in those days. But I don't think that it will make much of an impression because of the way people think today. As I said, I don't think we'll see the level of patriotism that we had in the 1930s. I just don't. You can see evidence of it right now. You people all think this invasion of Iraq was a good thing? Can any of you think of any reason for us being there? I mean, honestly. You're the people that are gonna have to live with this, not me. I ain't got that many years left. When you get to be my age, you look at a lot of things and you wonder. Of course, I've seen a lot in my lifetime. Way back to the time of Herbert Hoover and before him. But I never saw anything like what we've got now. I don't know, you're gonna have to live with it, not me. Stop and think.

ET: Do you have any more questions we could answer for you?
RV: I don't really have questions except that I hope I've given you something you need, if I helped at all.

ET: Yes, thank you. And I think this is the end of our interview.
RV: Well, after the war was when my career really took off. That's when I decided that I was going to do something with my life, and I did. I was a union president, a union business agent, and a negotiator for the union. I was the union president, and then I went into management. I became a general foreman, shift supervisor, then an area supervisor. That's what I was when I retired in 1976. I did this on my own. I'm kind of proud of that because I didn't have the tools some people have. I didn't have a formal education. But I had the brains.

ET: Well, thank you for having me be able to interview you.
RV: Oh, you're a nice kid. I wasn't going to do this, believe me.

ET: Well, I appreciate it a lot. Thank you.