

Michael David Diederich, Senior.
Veteran

Mike Russert
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Interviewers

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

MD: Michael David Diederich Senior. My place of birth was Skokie, Illinois. [My birthday is] Eleven, twenty, seventeen [11/20/1917].

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

MD: High school graduate.

MR: Would you tell me where you were and what you recall of your feelings when you found out about Pearl Harbor?

MD: I was in show business then. I was working out west, different places, different hotels. Then shortly after that I got back to Chicago—Skokie was a suburb of Chicago—and I got put in 1A; so, I would be called for service. This one agent suggested he could get me on USO Camp Shows playing at Army, Navy, and Marine places doing shows. I did that, and they put me in 3A or 3B. I'm not sure which, it was something like that. I was in the same classification as some of the fellas that were working in war plants and places like that. I was touring with the USO Camp Show all over the United States, all different places, and this went on for, maybe, close to a year. They needed more young fellows, so I was going to be changed from 3A to 1A. So, I was with the show in Victoria Field in Texas—we were playing at that show—and it was an Air Corps Base. So that's where I enlisted. I took a test. I figured, if I'm going to go in—like a lot of guys I knew, they wanted to be a fighter pilot—so if I was going to be in service, I wanted to be a fighter pilot. So, I enlisted there and had got real high marks and passed. Then I left the show and went back to the Chicago—

MR: I'm going to stop you for a minute. I'm going to take a look at your background. I guess we've never did [interviewed] anyone that had been in USO Shows. From what years were you in USO Shows, prior to entering the military?

MD: I went into service in forty-three, so that was forty-two.

MR: So, 1942 to 1943?

MD: Yeah, I was with the Camp Shows for about a year, all through forty-two, until I enlisted. As a matter of fact, I went back to Chicago and had to wait 3 months before they called me.

MR: What did you do in the USO Shows?

MD: I did a marionette act. When I got out of service—you don't want to jump to that probably—I did the same thing. I went back with the USO Camp Shows because I couldn't get a car [laughter].

MR: Did you go around with any stars?

MD: Oh sure, oh yeah, especially when I got out, I worked with big-name bands. You name a big band, and I worked on the shows with all of them. Then there were more theater gigs. New York City had The Strand, and Roxy Theater, or played Radio City. I had a girl working with me. Then, when I got married later on—that girl married somebody else—my wife worked with me, so there were two of us. You don't want to talk about after I got out yet... because on the G.I. Bill—it had something to do with the army—when I got to New York I decided I wanted to do some photography too. So, I went through photography school on the G.I. Bill for a full year because I took everything. Color printing and everything. I had to stay in New York City and just do—they're called club dates, one nighters. By the time the year was up, all the agents—there must have been 40 or 50 agents in New York City then, just did one nighters, the banquets and things. By the time the year was up I was working every night and doing two shows, three shows on Saturday, so agents got to know the act and it worked out real good.

WC: Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

MD: I was working at a club in Las Vegas. A night club there, I don't remember the name of the club, but I was working in a club when Pearl Harbor happened.

WC: Do you remember how everybody reacted to that?

MD: Sure. We had to get Japan. That was a horrible thing that they pulled on us. I think anyone...[wanted] to get into service and help somehow, you know?

MR: Why don't you tell us then about when you went into the military service? Were you drafted or did you enlist?

MD: No, I enlisted.

MR: You enlisted. Did you select the Air Corp?

MD: Yes. I enlisted. I had my choice, to what to go in. I think that's what it was because I was definitely going to be in the Air Corps. I went back to Chicago—a friend of mine had a boat up in Wisconsin—so I went up there. My sister knew how to reach me, because on a minute's notice I had to report to somewhere down in Chicago. They put me on a train—not even a troop train—it was cadets. I went from there to Miami Beach, Florida and had basic training, [for] six weeks or eight weeks, whatever that took. We had training right on the beach. Everybody wanted to be a pilot, so they just took 50% of us and went off to gunnery school. From there we went on the troop train all the way up to Harlingen, Texas. That's where I went through gunnery school. We finished gunnery school and we're still waiting to either go to bombardier school or navigator [school].

Then, another report came out. Apparently, they were short on gunners. So, everybody was shipped off to different places. I was shipped off to Pueblo, Colorado. There I was put in a crew—we had a crew of ten people—I was a gunner. We trained there, flew missions, practice missions, and different things together. As a crew, we played football and basketball and did all kinds of things. In Pueblo, Colorado we were in that training—with the ten men—had to be at least three, four months, or five months. Then, they flew us to Lincoln, Nebraska. There we got a brand-new B-24, just for us, right out of the factories. We flew the plane a few times, only two or three or four days. Then we flew the plane—ten of us in the plane—from there to England.

MR: Did you keep the same crew all the way through?

MD: Yes. From England they flew us to Ireland. We were in Ireland for two or three weeks [for information on] what was going on, what the German fighters were doing. At that time, I wasn't a bombardier, I was just a gunner, and they were saying how the fighter planes—the German planes—were coming from a little high, straight at the nose, and they were also diving down and coming up with the gunner. At that time, we had a Sperry Ball on our plane. The first B-24s had the lower turret that you let down in the plane. We all had to fly different positions and I'm a little bit too tall for the Sperry Ball position, but I had to fly it in practice missions, and it was terrible—the way I was cramped up in there [laughter]. Then, when you let that turret down you get the feeling like you're leaving the plane. And when you moved your sticks—to the two fifty-caliber guns—to turn the turret, you got the feeling that you were breaking away from the airplane [laughter].

WC: Did you keep the same airplane?

MD: Yes, yeah.

MR: Was it a painted B-24?

MD: Our captain's wife—we had met her in Pueblo—her first name was Dorothy Kay. When we got over there [Europe], we voted and named our plane Dorothy Kay Special. So that's what we flew in all of the time.

MR: Did you decorate it at all? The nose art?

MD: The ground crew did. They put the bombs we dropped.

WC: Did they paint a woman on it or just the name?

MD: No, we just had the name. Just Dorothy Kay Special. A lot of the planes had pretty girls on them.

MR: Did you decorate your jackets at all, or write the name of the plane on your jackets?

MD: No. We didn't, no.

MR: What unit were you assigned to?

MD: I was in the 458th bomb group. We were in the 754th squadron. The base was called Horsham Saint Faith, and it was just out of Norwich, which was about ninety miles or so north of London.

MR: What was your usual assignment as gunner?

MD: I was a waist gunner for ten missions, and I was also an armorer gunner. I was in charge of loading the bombs. But after ten missions, they found with the pattern bombing that we're doing, it was better off to have a hot rod bombardier in the lead ship and the rest of the planes in the squadron would drop on the lead ship when he had bombs away. They moved me to the nose turret. [Before] then, I was a bombardier, I dropped the bombs. I was what they used to call a togglier. I stayed as a Staff Sergeant; I didn't become an officer. Originally, when your crew started there was at least an officer, the navigator, bombardier, and the pilot and co-pilot. But even if I drop the bombs, I didn't use a bomb site or anything. The lead ship dropped the bombs and as soon as he said bombs away, I dropped our bombs.

Being an armorer gunner, one time, two of our bombs didn't come out, they hung up in the bomb bay, and that was my job too. The catwalk was only about—on the B-24—eight or ten inches wide, it was very narrow. The pilot and co-pilot only had back [para]chutes. We had a harness—where we had two snaps—and you snapped the parachute on the front. I had to go out with the bomb bay doors open, I put that chute on, but it made it tough for me—hanging on in that narrow catwalk—with a screwdriver trying to get the little catches that held the bombs in—trying to force that to get the bombs out. I couldn't do it, so I found the extra wire the bombs had, because we had to go back—we had to land. This was over the North Sea. I had on the interphone, and the pilot said, hang on real tight I'll rock it over the right and left. [laughing] That isn't going to help if I couldn't get them out with a screwdriver, but I hung on and he did it anyway. Then looking down, the bomb bay doors are open and all of a sudden—I don't know whether it was a mistake by somebody or what—a B-24 went right underneath, it looked like it was about ten feet below us going the opposite way [laughing]. We're in trouble over the North Sea if we're

MR: How many missions did you fly?

MD: Thirty-five. First, we flew twenty-five missions, that was it. We had fighter planes and that coming at us. Our worse thing was the flak. The flak was horrible on those missions. Especially our last mission. Usually, they give you a milk run, but Munich was our last run. We got our interrogation in the morning and [they] said I got five-hundred flak guns—the flak was horrible. After twenty-five missions, I guess the doctors figured your nerves are kind of shot and you had to have a couple weeks rest. So, they sent us up to a real nice home in Scotland. We were like civilians. We went into town, [they] had bicycles for us, and they brought girls out to the place to have dancing. Just for a couple weeks. Just to forget about the missions. Then we had to go back and fly the other ten [missions].

WC: How long did it take you to fly the other ten missions?

MD: I was there for a full year. That's thirty-five completed missions. Sometimes we were having engine trouble or bad weather, and you go back [to base]. That didn't count, it had to be a completed mission. If you had engine trouble or something and you had to go back over the North Sea, or we dropped our bombs someplace. It took a year. It was at least eleven months.

MR: Was your plane ever hit by flak?

MD: Almost all the time. One time we had two-hundred and sixty holes. The ground crew counted them. I had some holes the size of my fist. I was feeling around to see if I was hit [laughing]. They went through the side of the plane. Almost every mission, we had—

WC: Was anybody injured aboard your plane?

MD: No. We were all really lucky. When you stop to think of some of the injuries that they had, and planes going down. We just lucked out.

MR: Were you ever under attack by fighters?

MD: Yeah. I don't think we were attacked by fighters the last ten missions. Apparently, by that time, we had bombed out so much that they [the Germans] were short on fuel. Toward the end they even had the jets coming up.

MR: Did you ever see any of the jets?

MD: No.

MR: After you did your thirty-five missions, did you go back to the states?

MD: Yes. I got off the plane, and I was one of them that wasn't an injury, but I guess I was flak happy—that's what they used to call it—from the nerves. They took me in the ambulance. I was in the hospital—the crew left—and they were looking for stones in my kidneys. They never found any stones in my kidneys. ...especially that last mission, you were expecting a milk run and you're on a real bad mission. It was just nerves. So, I was in the hospital about a week, then they released me, and I came back [to the states]. I came back on the Queen Elizabeth [boat]. We helped fellows who were wounded. We helped load them on [the boat]. So, we came back on the Queen Elizabeth. The Queen Elizabeth—apparently it was fast enough that it could outrun submarines. We get escort out of Scotland for a ways out, then after that Queen Elizabeth was on its own.

MR: Now, when were you discharged?

MD: First I had to lay en route, Chicago, my hometown, for two weeks. Then single fellas were assigned to Santa Ana, California, and married men went to Florida for two- or three-weeks rest. So, I was out in Santa Ana, California—similar to when we had after twenty-five missions—at a real nice place where we had a lot of food, and we could go into town and everything. Then, I was assigned from there to Chanute Field. I could have been in the special service being in show business all the time. But after I flew that first mission, I said, oh, you crazy guy, you wanted to be a flyer, I could have been in special

services somewhere. So, now, they sent me to Chanute Field in special services. They gave me a staff car and I went up to—all my marionettes were at my sister's house in Skokie. I went to Skokie and picked up the marionettes. I did shows at the base, and I helped the USO Camp Shows when they came there, and different things like that.

MR: Now, did you do mainly the shows in the United States, or did you go overseas when you were in special services?

MD: No. Special service I just did shows at the base, at Chanute Field, and it wasn't that long. I was only there three or four months, six months or so. My MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was 611, which is aerial gunner. They thought the Japanese were starting all the forest fires somehow, out in the west coast, out in Oregon and that area. There were some spots that were so back in the woods that they knew it couldn't be set by somebody with cigarettes or something. So, there were all these aerial gunners going out to fight these forest fires. I had to take all my marionettes—they gave me a staff car again—I took them back up and put them back at my sister's house. I had to be back down to catch a train the next morning. We took a train from there [Chanute Field] to Portland, Oregon. I was stationed at a base in Portland, Oregon fighting forest fires until the war ended. As a matter of fact, when the war ended, I was on a two-day pass in Portland, Oregon having a good time. It was a big celebration [laughing]. Then I sent a wire to the USO Camp Shows in New York City. They sent a wire back, said they could put me on a show in two weeks—because I knew if I went back, I wouldn't be able to get a car and all that—so it would be better if I went on the USO Camp Shows again. I took that to the office—I had a lot of points anyway—so he got me out right away. I went right back to Chicago—got the marionettes—went right to New York, and all within a few weeks I was on a train to Frisco [San Francisco]. From Frisco we flew to our first show in Hawaii. We did [military] bases, then we did shows. With that camp show, it was a six-month tour. Quite a bit of the time we spent in Manila. The war had just ended and there were plenty of soldiers over there, sailors and everything. We worked out of Manila and flew to different islands, where our servicemen were.

WC: Did you ever run into any fellas that you knew while you were in service, while you were doing that?

MD: No. [Continuing his story from before] Then we went from there up to Tokyo. We were in Tokyo until the end of the six-month tour. The whole show—it was four acts; we had a three-piece band. We were put on a troop ship, and we did shows on the way back from Tokyo to San Francisco. I went back to Chicago, I still couldn't get a car—it was ridiculous—and I had to have a car with all the props I had; because I had a stage, and I did the marionette act in black lights. I had my own black lights and everything. So, it would look like the marionettes were working all by themselves; you know like black lights, we wore black gloves and everything, a black stage and everything. So, we had a regular blackout when our act went on. Just the black lights picked up this fluorescent material.

MR: What kind of marionette show did you put on? Was it a comedy? What kind of show was it?

MD: Mostly dancing. That's how I got into show business. I won the state championship in Florida. In my senior year in high school—I went to New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois—and our senior year in high school I teamed up with a girl, who was a real great dancer. In all the jitterbug contests—they had them at the theaters in Chicago—and it was, at that time a fifty dollar—which was a lot of money back then—fifty-, hundred-dollar first prize. So, we started winning first prize wherever we went. First prize, first prize, first prize. I went down to Florida with my dad. An agent picked us up and put six of us together, three couples. He had us working in fairs—and that's why I didn't go to college, because I started doing shows that way. Well, I left, and I went with my dad down to Florida; and they were going to have a state jitterbug contest for the state championship. So, I called up this girl that lived in Wilmette, Illinois, and she came down [to Florida] and we entered in the contest, and we took first prize in that. That's what got me started in show business. Then the agent we got, got us a two-week engagement at the national theater—it's like Radio City—in Havana, Cuba. We worked some hotels over in Havana, Cuba, then the agent started booking us up through Florida, and all those places. That's why I ended up being in California when the war broke out in forty-one [1941]. So, I called USO Camp Shows again, I thought, well I wouldn't mind doing another set of my tour over in Europe. I could see what I had once bombed; because I dropped those bombs for all those missions. We got to New York, and in the last few days, all of a sudden, they switched me around, and they put me on a different show, and I ended up back in the Pacific again for another six months [laughing].

Oh, you asked me a question about if there was comedy. There was comedy in it [the show] too. We opened with a mambo dance team—there was no comedy in that, but a real nice mambo dance team—and as I said, I put my dancing into the marionettes. People used to tell me that. They said your marionettes really look like they're dancing. We had a comedy part; that would have been the skeleton. We had a break away skeleton that broke all apart, and pieces would go off. We had five sailors, and an ice skater. Four sailors, I marched out, then she [my assistant] brought the other sailor out, he played a drum—well, the orchestra did it—but it looked like he was playing the drum, and he had a trumpet. As a matter of fact, with the four sailors, we used to get some howls when we played some of the army bases. They wanted to see soldiers; they didn't want to see sailors [laughing]. It was just funny though, because we always got great applause after—the sailors [act] was the last number. They were big. My marionettes were thirty-, thirty-six inches tall. They were big marionettes—

MR: Did you make your own [marionettes]?

MD: Yeah. [Continuing story] But the sailors [act] was the last number. We worked all the other things on the stage; we had a jitterbug. All that was on the stage. When we finished the stage, she [my assistant] would pull the stage off and I would do the ice skater. That was out on the floor. After the ice skater, we closed with the sailors.

MR: How long did you do USO shows after the war?

MD: We did them all the way up until about ten years ago. I'm eighty-five now. My wife had a couple knee operations; she couldn't get up on the stage, so that's why we quit.

MR: So, you've done USO shows up to—

MD: Oh, no no no, not USOs. USOs, I did a six-month tour. A year before I went into service—when I enlisted in Texas—and then I did two six-month tours after [the war]. Then, I was working with name bands and road shows and movie stars. Until I finally came to New York. I told you about the photography school. Then I had to stay around, just do one-nighters. That worked out so well. I had the acts telling me for years, Mike you're crazy, you're working on the road for two weeks and three weeks, then you got two weeks off. Do club dates. You'll make more money because you're staying in one spot.

MR: Have you ever joined any veterans' organizations?

MD: No, no.

MR: Do you belong to the 8th Air-Force Society or anything like that?

MD: No, no.

MR: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that you served with?

MD: Yeah. Not our crew, but another crew that we were very friendly with. They were at the same training, way back in Pueblo, Colorado. I see a couple of those folks, from that crew, because they still have a reunion. There's only three of them left now. One fella, George Howard, I just saw here about six months ago. He came up to New York, we went out and had dinner. But why we [my crew] never had a reunion, I don't know. Quite a few of the crews would have a reunion every so often.

MR: What do you think are your fondest memories of your USO shows? Maybe some big band or movie star you were with?

MD: Gypsy Markoff was in one of our shows, she was the star of the show. She played accordion. She was in the USO Camp Shows over in Europe and the plane crashed. She survived. It crashed on landing. She had hurt her arm, but she survived. Several of them were killed in that accident. She was in one show. The other show I was on with a lady, a comic, named Sybil Bowen. She was known pretty well then, but today if you mention that name to anybody—even if you mentioned the name Gypsy Markoff—I don't think they would know that name. Sybil Bowen, she was a very funny lady, very good, and she emceed [MC] the show. Gypsy Markoff didn't emcee the show, she had a husband, he was a singer, he emceed the show.

Because it's show business, that's where I met my wife, because she was in show business too. She was a singer. We had six kids. I put them all through college and they're all doing well. I had a very good friend that had started a trout fishing business up in Des Plaines, Illinois, and he wanted me to do something like that in New York. So,

after Dorothy and I got married we bought a house in Westchester. I started looking around for property to start a trout fishing farm—that's what he had, trout fishing. So, I bought twenty-six acres up in Rockland County, which is north of New York City about thirty miles, thirty-five miles; and I started the trout fishing farm, same as he had. Well, that didn't go over too great. We were busy doing shows too. In summer, we would go up to the Catskill Mountains [unclear], we would do shows up there; and still do the one-nighters, because now we have all these kids. Then I decided to [turn] the property into a swim club. So, I opened a swim club. We had a membership swim club for twenty-five years on our property. I Finally closed that about ten years ago, and I subdivided. I've been building houses since. [laughing] I don't know when I'm going to retire, I've been building houses—I mean, I don't build the houses, a general contractor does. I put all the stuff together. I didn't know anything about that, but I had a friend who was a plumber that said, Mike don't worry, I'll help you, get you started, and I got a book on what to do with that. I don't think I'm building more houses though. I think I'll finish the last one—they got to [unclear] summer. I think I'm just going to sell these two lots. One lot we may even keep for one of the kids. And then our house—we have a house, acre and a half—they're all acre lots.

MR: Thank you very much for your interview.

MD: You're entirely welcome.