

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SEYMOUR MITTERHOFF

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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MANCHESTER, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an interview on April 26, 2010, with Seymour Mitterhoff in Manchester, New Jersey, with Thomas Duffy and Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Thank you so much for having us here, you and your wife has been wonderful with your hospitality this afternoon. Could you tell me for the record where and when you were born?

Seymour Mitterhoff: I was born in Newark, New Jersey, on Ridgewood Avenue, on October 29, 1921, a long time ago.

SH: Were you born at home?

SM: I think they had a special hospital for birthing and that's what happened there.

SH: We are going to start the questioning by talking asking about your family history.

SM: All right, good.

SH: We'd like to know a little information about your father and his family background.

SM: Right. My father immigrated to this country at the end of the 19th century and he came from close to Kiev in Russia, that's where it was, and he did something that I don't think I could do. He picked up with ... a few of his relatives and they went to this country. They hoofed it to Hamburg and took one of those dirty, old, what'd they call them?

SH: Like a steamer?

SM: It was some kind of a boat, I know that, [laughter] and he educated himself. He sat in a classroom with four and five year old children just to learn the English language.

SH: Did he really?

SM: And very seldom did he miss a day reading a newspaper and he got to a point where he could add very, very good--mathematically--and he had a hard time. ... He had a good work ethic and, during that time, it was at the height of the Depression, he had a very bad time, we all did, whereas this thing [the Great Recession] is a cakewalk compared to what happened to us. There was a time when, even though I was young, the Crash happened in 1929 and I can vividly remember men sitting around idly, with nothing to do, and they had no benefits from the government and it was very hard, but you could get a hundred pound sack of potatoes for ninety-nine cents and that's what we lived on, that's it, but they always provided a good home for us, always, always, and he was a good worker.

SH: How old was he when he came to the United States?

SM: He was about, I guess, about eighteen years old, yes.

SH: You said other family members came.

SM: No, we had a tradition, the Jews have a tradition, that they try to bring people over here, help them. ... He helped most of his family come over here by himself.

SH: Were there family already over here for him to join?

SM: Yes. He had to be sponsored. ... He was a very good man.

SH: Did he bring all of his family?

SM: Most of them. I had a cousin, she was a woman, and she came over. She witnessed her parents being shot by the Bolsheviks and they had a hard time, they really did. So, they used to sleep on the stove. He came from a family of twelve children and by the time he came here, there were only two left. ... [It] was a rough time.

SH: Sounds like it.

SM: Yes.

SH: What became his profession?

SM: He was a commission merchant. He was in the produce business and he would go up to farms and make a deal with the farmers, and apples and grapes. ... He did a lot of traveling up in New York State and they would send it down and he would sell it for them and he would get a commission for it. He did okay--"okay." ... Gas was four cents a gallon then, [laughter] so, if you had a few bucks, you were good, but he did very well and, before the Crash, he had owned a ... property in Newark where they have a large building there now. He lost it, like everybody else, yes.

SH: Was he able to recover after the Crash and go back to the same business?

SM: Yes, [but] that was the best part of his life. Unfortunately, he had it too soon.

SH: What about your mother, can you tell us her story?

SM: Yes. My mother was born in this country and ... her parents were from Romania and she had two sisters and I knew all of them, and I knew my grandmother--she's the only grand person I knew. I didn't know anybody on my father's side. ... She was a home person and she was very talented. She ... oil painted, and very well. She learned to play the piano by herself and she liked to laugh a lot and she liked company. So, she was all around.

SH: What did her father and mother do in this country?

SM: Her father, I never knew about him, never, ever, but her mother married a milkman who went out and got ... those big cans of milk. ... He'd sit in front of the house where they lived and people would come by and they'd ladle it out. ...

SH: Did your mother go to school?

SM: Yes, she graduated high school. ... I think sixteen years old she graduated. I have pictures of her there. ...

SH: Was she educated in Newark or was that where the family was?

SM: No, New York. She lived on Hester Street in New York.

SH: Okay, down in the Village.

SM: Yes.

SH: Did your father come to New York when he came to the United States?

SM: ... I don't know. I don't know whether he came to New York. ... I guess he must've come to New York originally, but he had to go through Ellis Island, of course, but I'm the first American in the family, [first]-generation. [laughter]

SH: Tell me if you would how your parents met.

SM: They'd met through relatives. Everything was done through relatives--an aunt of mine, my grandmother's sister, was my mother's aunt, and she introduced them, yes. ... Everybody knew everybody in the family--some you didn't want to know. [laughter]

SH: Did you have brothers and sisters?

SM: I had one brother, an older brother, and my mother had another child that died in childbirth. ... Pearl Harbor, in December 7, 1941, he worked in New York and he was a lithographer and he always used to take the train. ... 8th of December, he came back and announced that he had enlisted in the Navy and that was that. [laughter]

SH: Did your family take the news well?

SM: Well, he was of age, he could do it. When I enlisted, I had to get my mother's signature. ... It took me three weeks--I conned her into it. Everybody went, everybody went, couldn't wait to go, if I had to stay home, I would have been ashamed to walk on the street. ... I never resented it or was sorry that I went. I was lucky, though--I got off light, yes.

SH: I would like to back up and talk about your growing up and what your first memories were going to school.

SM: Yes. I went to Maple Avenue School in Newark, walked to school and back, no busses, and I went to Weequahic High School in Newark. It was the third year it was open. It was a beautiful school and the whole tenor of everything was a lot slower than it is today. ... Newark

was a very busy place. At Broad and Market Street, the main part of town, they said that more people crossed that--there were four corners there--than at 42nd Street and Broadway.

SH: Really?

SM: But, on Sunday, you could walk downtown, you wouldn't see anybody, nobody, absolutely nobody. It was dead, [laughter] but there you'd go out for dinner, get a Chinese meal for thirty-five cents. ...

SH: Did you have after school jobs?

SM: I started to work when I was fourteen years old, always had something to do--caddy. ...

SH: Where did you caddy?

SM: At Weequahic Park golf course, had a nine hole golf course there.

SH: How far did you live from Weequahic Park?

SM: Two blocks.

SH: Oh, my gosh.

SM: Yes, yes.

SJ: That was like your backyard almost.

SM: Almost, yes, and I took up golf later on. I did pretty good, [laughter] but you'd get fifty cents for caddying nine holes and the caddies were lined up, like, "You go tomorrow." You'd have a license for it then.

SH: Oh, did you?

SM: Yes.

SH: Did you have to go to school to become a caddy?

SM: No, no.

SH: How did you get your license then?

SM: The park commission in Newark, you had to go over and they signed you up, yes.

SH: Were you involved in any sports in high school at all?

SM: ... No, no.

SH: Did you have an after school job in the winter?

SM: No. I used to work in a drug store.

SH: Did you?

SM: Two dollars a week.

SH: Where was the drug store?

SM: On Lyons Avenue in Newark, yes. ... [laughter] We used to do a lot of walking, one foot in front of the other, yes. [laughter]

SH: How ethnically diverse was your community?

SM: Well, there were no black people in those areas. Some of them were very well-to-do. ... One of them was a theater owner, he had two theaters in Newark, and it was a good life. I enjoyed my childhood, in spite of everything, but we made up our own things to do. ...

SH: What did you do? What were some of the things that you did?

SM: Played baseball, there was an empty lot in back of our house and we used to meet there with the kids, roast potatoes and stuff like that, big time. [laughter] The movies were ten cents.

SH: Did you go often to the movies?

SM: I loved the movies, yes.

SH: Did you?

SM: As a matter-of-fact, that's one of the reasons I enlisted. When the war started, I saw, ... what was it, *To The Shores of Tripoli* (1942). ... I don't know what it was, one of those movies, and I got taken by it, yes, and then, when ... my wife and I used to go to the theater, this was in '40, '41, and I saw these fellows in uniform, I got carried away. [laughter]

SH: The newsreels, you watched those as well?

SM: Oh, yes. There was a theater in Newark that was a newsreel theater, only newsreels.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes, ... my wife and I always had a date there on Wednesday night and she used to work in Bamberger's Department store. ... We'd have spaghetti and meat balls, twenty-five cents, big deal, and go to the newsreel theater, that was our standing date.

SH: As a young boy was there a certain subject in school that you liked best?

SM: Yes.

SH: What was that?

SM: History, I always enjoyed history. I liked reading, I enjoy reading, Horatio Alger and the whole bit. [laughter]

SH: Was there any thought that you would go to college after high school?

SM: I never had a plan--never--and that was my downfall. I just lived day to day, but I went to Rutgers in the pharmacy school in Newark. ... I worked in a furniture factory at that time and my schedule was I took a bus to downtown, a bus to work, reversed it on the way home, and same thing when I went to school at night--two there, two back, eight busses a day--forty cents and I was on the go six o'clock in the morning and I took some courses there, I enjoyed it. When I came out of the service, I was married then, and I had a full-blown case of post-traumatic stress disorder. I had five years--the worst five years of my life. It took me a long time to get over it. There was no help for anybody. You go to the doctor and they give you an aspirin, that was it, and the VA was non-existent. You were on your own.

SH: Before we go into your military service, in high school did you take college preparatory courses?

SM: Most people didn't go to college then. You were very lucky if your parents could afford it although it was very inexpensive. There just wasn't money around.

SH: You met your wife in high school?

SM: Yes.

SH: Is that where you first met?

SM: Yes. I was afraid to touch her, I thought she would break, but I found out differently. She's the stronger one.

SH: That is nice. Did she live in the same community that you did?

SM: She lived not too far, it was East Orange, and I used to walk up to her house from Newark, I didn't think anything of that.

SH: I know that is up a very big hill.

SM: Yes.

SH: In high school, was your family politically active?

SM: My father always voted. My mother didn't vote at all. When she married my father, she was an American citizen, but she married an alien, and they took her citizenship away, and she was so upset she never went back. She never applied for it again.

SH: Did she have to apply for citizenship again?

SM: Yes.

SH: Obviously, your father became a naturalized citizen.

SM: ... It's terrible isn't it?

SH: I am shocked, I really am. What language was spoken at home?

SM: English, and Jewish when they didn't want me to know what was going on--Hebrew.

SH: They spoke Hebrew or Yiddish?

SM: Yiddish.

SH: Was your family observant?

SM: To a point. My mother kept what they called a Kosher house when she was home. When she was out, clams, ham, the whole bit. My father always told me, "Don't give up anything, ... stomach comes first, eat."

SH: Your father was eighteen when he came to the United States. Did he have to serve in World War I?

SM: No. That's the reason they came over. They were cannon fodder, they put them up front and got rid of them. ... They had a tough life really, tough.

SH: Did either your father or yourself experience any anti-Semitism in the Newark area?

SM: I never did, no, ... but my father did, I'm sure he did. The first job he had when he came to this country was for Edison. He walked from Newark up to the plant and he got a job. The job was to take plates from batteries and dip them in acid. He lasted one day and he never went back. [laughter] That wasn't for him.

SH: You talked about having an older brother. Did you hang out with him or did you go your own way?

SM: We weren't what you called close, but he was always looking out for me, yes. He was pretty good with his hands, so anybody that did anything was in trouble.

SH: Did either your brother play any kind of sports or did you follow any teams?

SM: Golf was the main thing.

SH: For both of you?

SM: Oh, yes. I bought my first club, a putter, it had a wood shaft, it cost me fifty cents. I wish I had it now.

SH: I bet you do. What year did you graduate from high school?

SM: 1940.

SH: When you graduate, Hitler has already gone into Poland in '39 and France has fallen. Did you follow this?

SM: Oh yes, I was always interested in politics, and there were groups that went around, we had a [German American] Bund in Irvington.

SH: Did you really?

SM: Yes, and Fritz Kuhn was the head of the Bund and my people went over there and they were breaking their legs right and left, they put them on the sidewalk, on the curb, and bat, that was it.

SH: You were part of this group?

SM: No, ... I was upset about it.

SH: But you heard that they were going to do this or that they had done it?

SM: They did it. ...

SH: That must have been something,

SM: Yes, it was, it was a terrible time.

SH: Were there other people in your school that talked about wanting to stay out of the war?

SM: Never spoke about it.

SH: What did your family think of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal programs such as the WPA and the CCC?

SM: We revered him, he was a savior, I always liked him. I think he was one of the greatest presidents we had and we had some very good presidents, some lemons too. He was a wonderful

man. When he died I was in China at that time and a couple of weeks later they sent a film over for the troops to hear Truman speak. He became the next president. When I saw that I thought, "My God, what's going to happen to us?"

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes, but he turned out to be a wonderful person--strong.

SH: What was the initial reaction when you heard that Franklin Roosevelt had died?

SM: ... People loved him--there were some of course that didn't, but he was a good man, he was a good politician and he was bright.

SH: Did the troops react at all?

SM: Didn't even talk about him. ... I was very unhappy about that.

SH: Had you listened to the fireside chats before you left this country?

SM: Oh yes, everybody did. If you had a radio, you listened.

SH: Did you have a radio?

SM: We had a radio, Majestic, I don't know how many tubes it had, ... ninety or something, I don't know.

SH: Before the war, did you listen to music?

SM: Every night before I went to bed, the radio was on, we had a place in Pompton Plains which was Frank Dailey's Meadowbrook and all of the big bands used to come up there. ... My wife and I used to go and see Glen Miller when I was in Montgomery, Alabama--that's where my first stop was when I went in the service--he was stationed there and, of course, you know, he died, he was supposed to go overseas, but he didn't quite make it. ... I loved that, I did, and the bands used to come from all over the stations at night, 11-11:30, and they played till about 12:30.

SH: Oh, really.

SM: From all over the coast, and you heard all the big bands, Artie Shaw.

SH: Did you have any other hobbies as a young man?

SM: Hobby--I was a Boy Scout, I was close to being an Eagle Scout. ... I was a Life Scout, yes.

SH: What troop did you belong to?

SM: Troop 48. ... I looked funny in my uniform, I sure did. [laughter]

SH: Did you go to any of the jamborees or any of the camps?

SM: No, they didn't have that. I went to camp. Camp was up in Blairstown, New Jersey, and it was seven dollars a week, and my folks sent me for two weeks. ... It was a Boy Scout camp, Camp Mohegan. ... We used to go to Lake Hopatcong, they had a big park like Olympic Park. The counselors would take us, and it was a nice time.

SH: Did the family take vacations?

SM: No, no.

SH: I just wondered if you had done any traveling before World War II.

SM: The furthest I went was Pennsylvania and New York State. That's where I used to go with my father on those trips, but I didn't do any traveling. Since then, a lot--I've been to forty countries.

SH: Wonderful.

SM: Yes, my wife and I have been to Europe twenty times and on ten cruises. [We] used to winter in Miami until I fell apart, and that's it.

SH: I just wanted to find out if you had done any traveling prior to the service.

SM: When I went in the service, I went in the service on my birthday. When I came back to the States, I was coming up the Hudson River on my birthday.

SH: Were you really?

SM: Yes.

SH: Amazing. What year did you enlist?

SM: I enlisted in 1942 and ... my discharge was December 13th, 1945. Five years later I got a letter from the Reserves that I'm going to go to Korea, and fortunately I got out of that. I never would have come back. ... All the things that were happening at the end of tour, I was almost ready for something to happen. ...

SH: ... Were you still working for the pharmacy as well as going to pharmacy school and working for the furniture company before the service?

WM: Yes.

SH: You were working at two jobs.

SM: Yes, only six days a week, twelve bucks a week, and a dollar for union dues.

SH: Which union did you have to join in the furniture company?

SM: ... It was their own union, it was under the table or something, I don't know what it was.

SH: Really.?

SM: Well, before I went into the service, just before, I worked for Purolator in the office, which was a nice job.

SH: You talked about wanting to get into the service as soon as you could and your mother had to sign so you could enlist.

SM: I felt that it gave me an opportunity to pick the place I want to be. I didn't want to be on the ground, I don't know, and fortunately I did, and it worked out.

SH: You were trying to get into the Air Corps rather than the Navy or any of the other branches.

SM: Yes, my brother went to the Navy. ... He was stationed in Hawaii for four years. ... He was an airplane mechanic.

SH: Was he?

SM: Yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

Thomas Duffy: Where and when did you hear about the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941?

SM: It was a Sunday afternoon, I just come out of the movies, and I went home and I turned the radio on, and I heard it.

TD: What were your feelings about it?

SM: I was very upset. Somehow, everybody had a feeling about something like that was going to happen, because there was a big to do with Roosevelt and the Japanese. Something was going to happen for sure.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes.

SH: You were not shocked that the attack came.

SM: Oh, yes, everybody, the people were close during the war. They did everything and anything they had to do that they would be a success. People don't have any idea what those early years were. The first people that went, when they had the draft, that was before, but the men were trained, and they had trucks with signs on, "tank," and broom sticks for guns, all that stuff, but the whole country went all out, and there was no other feeling about it. It was something that had to be done and everybody seemed to sense that we had to do it.

SH: When you applied to go in as part of the Air Corps, did you want to fly?

SM: Yes, sure.

SH: Your brother was a mechanic--was that something that you were prepared to do, or did you want to be a pilot?

SM: He didn't have any choice, he just went in and that was it.

SH: Well, talk to us about where you first went down to and enlisted at.

SM: Well, I enlisted in February and I had an attack of appendicitis after that, so I got my first leave before I went in, I was home, and it pushed me up one class. They used to rate the classes as 43G, 44 and numerically and with letters. I was in 43G and I put in for heavy bombers, and it's good I didn't go because most of the guys in there--they're gone.

SH: Did any of your friends go in at the same time?

SM: Oh, yes, I had a lot of friends. I had one friend who that was lost in D-Day [June 6, 1944], another friend that was a bombardier on a B-25, left the States for combat. He never got there.

SH: Had you heard about this before you left or was this after the war that you found out about them?

SM: Before I left. I had one friend of mine ... that wanted to go in the worst way, but he had a very bad knee, but he somehow weaseled his way into the Merchant Marines and he was all over the place. Everybody did their part and without resentment, it was all we had to do.

SH: You reported to Newark. Where were you sent from there?

SM: When we left Newark they paraded us down the street to city hall and it was a big to do, and then we went on the Central Railroad and ... first stop was supposed to be Nashville, Tennessee, but they were diverted, we went up to Boston, and then, we went down to, it was a milk train, stopped every place along the way, and it was crowded, and it was noisy, and finally we landed at Nashville, Tennessee, that's the first stop. I was there for a couple of weeks and they outfitted us, they gave us our outfits there. ... They gave us these long coats--we looked like Russian generals. [laughter]

SH: Was it cold that time of year?

SM: This was October. It wasn't bad. ...

SH: What kind of training were you getting in Nashville?

SM: ... It was only a stop off, yes, staging area. From there I went to Maxwell Field in Alabama.

SH: You did not need your coat there then.

SM: No, I spent a lot of time Florida.

SH: From Nashville you went to Alabama.

SM: ... In my training, I spent a lot of time.

SH: Was your basic training in Alabama?

SM: That was preflight.

SH: How difficult was preflight?

SM: That was nothing, ... no problem.

SH: Were your instructors civilians?

SM: Yes, most of them were, sure--and some Army people.

SH: In Alabama, did people wash out?

SM: If they wash at preflight, they shouldn't even be there. [laughter]

SH: Did that happen?

SM: No.

SH: From Alabama, where do they send you?

SM: ... Arcadia, Florida, that was basic flight school, and I took my wife with me everywhere we went.

SH: Did you really?

SM: Yes.

SH: Had you gotten married before you left?

SM: Yes, while I was in the service.

SH: When did you get married and where?

SM: February 9th, 1943.

SH: In Newark?

SM: Yes.

SH: Did you have to make arrangements really quickly?

SM: No, I was home, because when I was in Nashville, they had a parade, and I got nasopharyngitis and I got two weeks off. ... I called her up and I asked her and she said yes, and that was it. ... We knew we would get married--not would we, but when.

SH: Was there any discussion about waiting?

SM: I look at this in retrospect, it was a stupid thing to do, it really was, because going into where I was going into, and chances are I might not come back. It was stupid, but I was lucky, I was really lucky.

SH: Did her family have any objections?

SM: They hated me.

SH: You had been dating her all these years.

SM: Her father--I'm not going to talk about that--but her mother was a gem. She was a wonderful woman, I was crazy about her. She was a doll. They didn't come to the wedding.

SH: Oh, it was just the two of you.

SM: Yes, two, and her other relatives.

SH: You went to city hall?

SM: It was in a rabbi's study. ... Yes, it was B'nai Abraham in Newark. I was *Bar Mitzvah*-ed there.

SH: Okay.

SM: The rabbi was mad at me anyhow, I did some stuff. ...

SH: Really?

SM: ... I pushed him too far. [laughter]

SH: Where was your honeymoon?

SM: Honeymoon, what is that? [laughter] We did a honeymoon. We stayed at the Edison Hotel in New York.

SH: Did you really?

SM: Yes, it was nice.

SH: And then you took her with you.

SM: I took her, wherever I could, I took her with me, and it was mostly boring for her, but ... it was good for me, anyhow.

SH: Was it hard to find a place to live for her?

SM: She always found some place, and particularly servicemen, ... that's how we got our first place when we came out of the service. We stood down at the *Newark News* waiting for the newspaper to come out, and we got the ads, and we hightail it to the place and we got it because I was in uniform. It was a third floor walkup, but it was home.

SH: Did you take your wife to Alabama during preflight training?

SM: She didn't come down. ...

SH: She stayed with her family.

SM: Yes.

SH: She joined you when you were in Arcadia?

SM: Oh, yes, it was nice. Arcadia was a lovely little town, I went back there a couple of years ago, and it was called Roscoe Turner's Flying School, but it was like a very nice motel and the aviation cadets were treated with kid gloves.

SH: Really?

SM: Oh, yes. They played a little hell--they dumped a big fish in the swimming pool. [laughter] ... I took my basic training there and I got through flight school. ... I used to do "loopity-loops" and my wife was down on the lawn, used to wave to me. [laughter]

SH: What aircraft were you training on?

SM: PT trainer.

SH: Did you feel that you were well-trained?

SM: Oh, yes.

SH: From Arcadia where are you sent?

SM: I went to Macon, Georgia, that was ... basic flight training and there was PT multi, yes, and I did some stuff I shouldn't have done, and they dumped me--bad--and that was it.

SH: That is when you got out of flight training.

SM: Well, I stayed there flying, but they didn't want to waste anybody, they knew if you didn't throw up when you went up, you were all right.

SH: You could do that.

SM: We had one guy in our squadron, he taxied out on the runway, and threw up. [laughter]

SH: Were there a lot of training accidents?

SM: You heard the "meat wagon" all night long.

SH: Really.

SM: Yes.

SH: Do you want to talk about what you did that washed you out?

SM: [laughter] I just made a stupid mistake, that's all. I got lost, but they did do me a favor. ...

SH: Did you know that when you were lost you would get washed out?

SM: I figured it's going to happen, yes.

SH: How did you take the news and how did they deliver the news?

SM: Well, I didn't think too much of it really. I was a little embarrassed, but they sent down to the flight instructor and he showed me the way home.

SH: You had to land somewhere else.

SM: Back to the base, yes. So, for a couple of weeks, I was a pilot, and then I got this, and I took it. It was an opportunity.

SH: What was it that they offered you?

SM: The whole idea of night fighting was radar based, and it had some technical stuff you had to learn, and you have to be able to do weather flying, and have the intelligence to do what you're supposed to do. The first place we went for training was Kissimmee, Florida. In Kissimmee, we stayed at the tax assessor's house.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes, nice man and his wife, and he wanted me to buy some land down there, seventy-five cents an acre. I couldn't afford it. That's where Disney is now.

SH: What were you being trained on and who were your instructors and what were you going to do?

SM: The first thing they did, they teamed you up with a pilot, and you had to be pretty much aligned in the way of thinking, the way you do things and everything else. ... But the training, the actual flight training, they picked Florida because it was level, very level. You didn't have to concern yourself with any hills, and we started training on A20s, and it was a nice little airplane, and then, from there we went to A26, which is a little bigger, but the same type of plane.

SH: Is this with the same pilot you are training with?

SM: Yes.

SH: Do you remember his name and where he was from?

SM: His name is John Gatti, who later, when he got out of the service, was the mayor of San Antonio. He's a nice guy, a good pilot.

SH: The A26 is a two-seater.

SM: Just two people.

SH: Just two people in a crew.

SM: ... After that training, and there was quite a bit of training, we went out to California to Hammer Field. Well, first to ... Fresno, California and then that's where the squadron was activated. ... Then we went to Bakersfield to do the flying, at Hammer Field, and we used to fly every night up and down the valley taking airplanes and flying them, and practicing.

SH: What was the job of this aircraft?

SM: Well, it's designed specifically to follow an airplane. ... We had a parabolic reflector in the nose that rotated three quarters, and the pilot, radar observer, which I was, I was the

observer/navigator, and you ... see a plane and you have to get close enough to see if it's our plane, or if it isn't our plane. We shot down one of our own, anyhow.

SH: Did you really?

SM: ... You had a thing called the IFF, which is identity friend or foe. Every plane that went up had to have that on, and we knew whether it was ours or theirs, and one of our men when we were overseas, shot down a B-24. He didn't turn it on, it was his own fault. Those things happen. ...

SH: What kind of training did you specifically have to have that would be different from a regular navigator to do the job you did?

SM: Well, as far as the radar is concerned, let me show you a picture, you know what the plane looks like? The P-61 was made by North American and Northrop, and it originally had four 20-millimeter cannons in the nose. ... The first ones had three people. It had a gun turret, 50-millimeter, but it is easily armed, it could carry two 500 pound bombs, two napalm bombs, six rockets, not all at once, but it was able to do that, and it was a twin boom airplane, two sections. ... I used to sit back here. These engines were the same engines that were on a B-17, Pratt and Whitney 2400s, and big wing, and a lot of flap, which means you could take off in short space, land on a short space. When we were getting up there, and we felt it was dangerous, we used to put it in a dive, 400 miles an hour. I thought the thing would fall apart, but it was a very good airplane, it had a lot of flap. ... One mission I was on, we had, I'll show you pictures of it, had "ack" over here, "ack-ack."

SH: Oh, my.

SM: Full of bullet holes, I'll show it to you.

SH: In this training that you're going through, are you an enlisted man or are you an officer?

SM: I was a warrant officer. ... I flew fifty-three missions.

SH: Before we start talking about your missions and some of those experiences, one of the questions that we want to ask is what was it like for a young man from Newark to suddenly be in the South?

SM: I never paid attention to stuff like that. ... It was terrible.

SH: You saw that?

SM: Oh, yes.

SH: Did you and your wife go to the base for recreation or were you going to the town?

SM: We couldn't put two nickels together.

SH: No movies or dances?

SM: No, no. In fact, we ran out of money for food one time, I didn't know what the hell I was going to do. We only made \$75.00 a month in training. When I was an officer I made \$400.00 a week, all right, that was living. [laughter]

SH: Can you tell me more about your training in California?

SM: Yes, I sat in the back of the plane. ... I was back here, and between here and here, the front of the plane was filled with gear with more tubes than you can imagine. This thing was prehistoric compared to what's going on today.

SH: But then it was very sophisticated.

SM: But this is where we picked up the signal, right here.

SH: The nose of the airplane.

SM: And then I took control, and told the pilot what to do, go left, go right, go up, go down, and that's how we did it.

SH: What was your primary job when you went up at night?

SM: Just to look for planes.

SH: Looking for other planes?

SM: Right, that's all we did. I went to gunnery school.

SH: Where did you do that at?

SM: In Fort Myers.

SH: Virginia?

SM: No, Florida. ... I used to go up in an AT-6 in the back with the 50-caliber machineguns. It's a good thing I didn't shoot somebody.

SH: You were trained to fire the weaponry as well as to navigate the plane.

SM: Yes, but they cut that out. ... See, some of them had a turret back here with machineguns. They changed it. They only made 800 of these, and I was responsible for cracking one up.

SH: How did you do that?

SM: I had to jump out. I'll tell you about that.

SH: The P-61 was designed for night fighting.

SM: Night fighting.

SH: Night fighting.

SM: ... We were in China. By the time we got there, the Japanese Air Force was gone, they just did nuisance stuff, pain in the neck stuff.

SH: From California, then where were you sent?

SM: First we went to Fresno, then we went to Hammer Field, and then we trained there, and then we went to New York by train.

SH: You went to New York by train?

SM: They never let you fly anywhere that wasn't necessary. The training was too strenuous, and they didn't want to lose anybody. Everybody else flew planes except us. We flew them when we needed them.

SH: When you came to New York, did your wife come at the same time?

SM: She left before.

SH: She came back to Newark to her family?

SM: Right.

SH: Did you go to California by train?

SM: Yes, six days.

SH: Okay, and then to come back, same thing.

SM: Yes.

SH: Did you experience anything on these train rides across the country?

SM: I loved it.

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes, it was good.

SH: Did you have Pullman cars?

SM: I forget it.

SH: I have to ask these questions.

SM: Two in the bottom and one on top, that's the way we went.

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes. One train trip that I took, the one in India I took, from Bombay to Calcutta took four days sitting up. ... There were none there. It was one and one, that's it.

SH: When you got to New York, did you have a chance to get a leave and go back to Newark or did you go straight out?

SM: We had a little time, and John and I and our wives, we went out all night. ... My father-in-law lent me his Cadillac for the day. ...

SH: So you went in style, right?

SM: Yes. ... He was from Newark.

SH: Oh I thought John Gatti was from Texas.

SM: He was a mayor in Texas after the war. He passed away, he had a very rare stroke.

SH: But he was originally from Newark?

SM: ... North Newark. ...

SH: Was his wife also from Newark?

SM: ... I don't know where she was from, she was a very quiet person. As a matter-of-fact, his wife was pregnant and when we were ready to go overseas, he asked to be held up, ... and they gave him time off, and it was lucky that we did. They had us slated for New Guinea which I could do without. ... When I was in China there were only two night fighter squadrons, one was up in Chengtu where Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. That's where they started and if you talk to them you get in big trouble, you couldn't go near them. [Editor's Note: Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were Chinese Communist Party leaders who after World War II would control all of China.]

SH: Really?

SM: Yes. It was cold there, it was very cold.

SH: Let us go back to New York. How are you going overseas?

SM: We went back to Camp Kilmer and from Camp Kilmer we took a train to ... Brooklyn, I think. ... We unloaded there--that's where we went overseas.

SH: What was the name of the ship you went?

SM: HMS *Puncher*, it was a British ship, and, Lend-Lease, and when we saw her, they had our ships on deck all strapped down, ready to go.

SH: So, you actually went over with your plane.

SM: Yes, they wouldn't, even overseas they were very careful about where they sent you. They didn't want to lose any men, any pilots.

SH: Did you travel in convoy then?

SM: You said it. We left there, went first to Roanoke, and then we went to Newport News, and then we went across the Atlantic, and it was a seven day trip and there was at least a hundred ships in the convoy. ... If you were in the air and you dropped a coke bottle you were going to hit something. [laughter]

SH: What time of year is this now that you are traveling?

SM: This is September.

SH: When did you know where you were heading?

SM: When we were in the middle of the ocean. ... When we left the States, we had to go to Sacramento, and that's where my outfit is. We got parkas, mukluks [soft cold-weather boots], mosquito netting, and we were totally confused. So we didn't know where we were going. ... When we were halfway over, the captain of the ship got everybody together and he read the orders. We were headed for Casablanca first, and then to Poltava in Russia.

SH: What did he tell you about your mission and what you would be doing?

SM: He couldn't tell you, that's where we were going. ... It took us six days to get across and going through the Straits of Gibraltar. [laughter] ... All the farm boys, they had them standing up at night looking.

SH: What did you do to pass the time from New York to Gibraltar?

SM: Well, it was a nice time, it was empty. Everybody was sick.

SH: Really?

SM: Not me. [laughter] Something must be wrong with me.

SH: You never were air sick, never were sea sick.

SM: No.

SH: That is good. How was the chow?

SM: We had good food. We stayed in Casablanca for ten days. ...

SH: How many planes went over in the convoy?

SM: I think there were about eight or ten planes on the deck, and they were strapped down good.

SH: Was the weather was fairly quiet in September?

SM: Yes, and we pulled into Casablanca, the whole Free French fleet was scuttled in the harbor. It was pathetic, all these big ships with keels sticking out of the water, it was awful.

SH: You could see them then still.

SM: Oh, yes.

SH: Do you remember when this was, what year?

SM: ... That had to be in 1944. ...

SH: Prior to this in June, the D-Day invasion [June 6, 1944] had taken place. What had you heard about it?

SM: I heard about it the morning it happened. Then we knew we were almost on our way.

SH: You think you are going to go to Russia, that that is going to be your ultimate destination.

SM: Yes, that is what they told us.

SH: Did you get off the ship in Casablanca?

SM: Yes.

SH: What did you see?

SM: In Casablanca? It was nice. I've never been any place that hasn't been nice, interesting anyhow. They did things for us. We saw Lily Pons, the opera singer.

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes, she gave a concert for us.

SH: Were there lots of military there?

SM: Yes, there was enough.

SH: Were any Brits there?

SM: You always saw Brits--always--they were there too. They played a prominent role in Africa. ...

SH: Where did they send you from Casablanca? Were you still traveling by ship?

SM: No.

SH: They got the planes off?

SM: Right.

SH: And reassembled them there in Casablanca?

SM: Right. Next stop, we went to Cairo.

SH: You flew to Cairo.

SM: Yes, I flew to Cairo.

SH: Okay.

SM: But I had stops at Benghazi, Libya, Tunisia, Tunis, and finally to Cairo.

SH: Did you see any war damage at these various bases?

SM: No.

SH: You did not see any of that.

SM: No.

SM: They wanted to keep me in good shape. [laughter]

SH: I thought maybe you saw some of the destruction that had happened.

SM: That's where I wanted to be, out of the infantry, hit and run.

SH: What about the Arabs, did you have any interaction with them?

SM: Yes.

SH: Now from Cairo, where did they send you? Did you get to look around at all when you were in Cairo?

SM: Oh, sure. Used to sit at Shepheard's Bar and have a drink. I went to the Royal Palace, went to the Pyramids, passed the Mena House where Roosevelt and Stalin and Churchill were, and got up on a camel, all that stuff, tourist stuff. [laughter] [Editor's Note: From November 22 to 26, 1943, President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek met to discuss war strategy and the postwar world at the Cairo Conference.]

SH: It must have been really something to see for a kid from Newark.

SM: Oh, you said it. [laughter]

SH: Were you good about taking photographs and sending letters home?

SM: I got lots of photographs, lots of them, all you want. ... We were in Cairo, we were sitting around doing nothing, and then they got orders. They changed where we were going.

SH: You were no longer going to go to Russia.

SM: No. Where were we going--Italy, ... to Naples, seven hour flight, and we stayed there two, three, four weeks maybe, something like that, and there's a lot to see there. We went to Mount Vesuvius.

SH: To Pompeii?

SM: Pompeii, yes. Pompeii and catacombs, that kind of stuff, and I enjoyed it.

SH: Had Rome been taken by this time?

SM: We were supposed to leave one day, and we were scheduled to go to Leghorn [Livorno] which is up in the north, and we were getting ready and we went out to the airport, and they called it off. They didn't take it [Rome] yet. "We didn't take it," they said. It was just as well, we didn't go. They turned us around, and then they decided we're going to go back to Egypt. So, we went by convoy down the east coast of Italy.

SH: They put you back on a ship?

SM: No.

SH: Oh, you are flying in convoy.

SM: Right. ... We went down the east coast of Italy to the heel and the boot, Taranto, Italy, and there's where we got the boat. ... We went swimming in Sicily, stopped at Sicily. We swam in the Augusta Bay, ... and then a four day trip, four day cruise to Port Said.

SH: What were they doing with your planes?

SM: I have no idea. They were ferrying them, I'm sure.

SH: So, from Port Said where did they send you? Was there anything interesting along the line you should be telling us about?

SM: Well, I went through the Suez Canal, yes, and in the middle of the Suez Canal there were four British soldiers sitting there having tea under an umbrella. That's what they were guarding. ... We ended up in Suez, ... I don't know, it's the bottom of the canal. From there we got a convoy.

SH: Flying?

SM: No, from Port Said or somewhere along, I'm a little mixed up now, but we ... got on a boat, that's right, it was a ... British luxury liner. When you had your dinner, you had the rings around the napkin.

SH: Oh, really?

SM: The British used to treat them like you know what, and we were never open to that. ... We didn't do that, the enlisted men [were treated] terrible, awful.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes.

SH: As a warrant officer, would you be considered an officer?

SM: Yes. We went through the Indian Ocean, going through the Canal, and then we went to Bombay.

SH: Were you traveling with an escort?

SM: No.

SH: It was just this liner. Do you remember the name of it?

SM: It was the sister ship, had almost the same name. I don't know, ... but it was British and as you pull into Bombay, there's Queen Victoria up on top looking over you, gateway to the East. ... We stayed in Bombay for about, I guess a week or so. When we got off the boat, everybody went and got bush jackets.

SH: Oh, really?

SM: Yes, they measure them, and they make them right there, and in an hour you pick them up.

SH: Do they really?

SM: Yes, on the sidewalk, six bucks, and then we took a train. The train was from Bombay to Calcutta, four days and nights.

SH: This was sitting straight up.

SM: Straight up, and we were transporting some Sudanese troops. They were very handsome black people, with fezzes, and all night long they were singing. They drove me nuts.

SH: Did they really? Were they speaking English?

SM: No.

SH: How many Americans are in this contingent?

SM: ... The whole squadron holds about 220 men and ... at least ten or twelve crews, and then they had office men, officers of the day and intelligence, all that stuff, yes.

SH: What about the ground crews, the ones that keep your planes flying? Are they traveling with you as well or are they traveling with the aircraft?

SM: ... They're traveling with enlisted men.

SH: They were coming at the same time just in a different car or accommodation.

SM: Yes.

SH: What was the weather like in India compared to where else you had been?

SM: We got there very close to the rainy season, and when the rains came, you had a pack of cigarettes in your pocket. By the time you went to go for one, it was all mush. ...

SH: Were you put in barracks or hotels when you arrived in India? How were you housed?

SM: In Bombay, I don't remember where we stayed. ...

SH: Do you know what you're going to be doing?

SM: Well, our orders were to go to India, that's all we knew, but we figured it out. When we were in Italy, there are two cities, Flogia and Bari, and their main task was to fly over to Ploesti

oil fields, and that's why they sent us to Russia. One night, they used to send in B-17s and B-24s ... that's where we were supposed to go, [Poltava]. ... One night the Germans came over ... and they let the planes out, and they destroyed thirty airplanes. ... They were really were in big trouble. ...

SH: That is why they changed you orders then?

SM: Yes.

SH: Did they ever put that base there in Russia that you know of?

SM: No, I don't think so. The only two night fighters squadrons were us in China, ... Chengtu, and in Chengkung.

SH: You were aware of what had happened to this base?

SM: Yes. ... It was out, everybody knew. ...

SH: Who is in command of your group now that you are in Bombay?

SM: We had a chief flying officer always, and a chief second in command operations officer. These were flying officers, they were in charge.

SH: From Bombay where did they send you?

SM: From Bombay we went to Pandaveswar.

SH: Further into India.

SM: About 200 miles up, yes. That was rainy, sweaty.

SH: What did you do with the mukluks. When did you decide not to take those with you?

SM: I didn't take it with me. I threw them away.

SH: You left them.

SM: Somebody got them.

SH: Did you have the right equipment that you needed, clothing and all of that?

SM: Yes, I didn't need anything.

SH: What was the normal day wear?

SM: You walk around, all together, you look like they do.

SH: What was an American warrant officer wearing? Were you wearing shorts?

SM: No, I always wore long khakis and a shirt, yes.

SH: Did you have to do your own laundry?

SM: When we got to China they did it for us, but they charge you.

SH: You went from Pandaveswar to China then? When you left Bombay you went northeast?

SM: We flew.

SH: You flew up there?

SM: Flew over the hump. ...

SH: You picked up your planes there?

SM: No.

SH: In Pandaveswar, what were you doing there?

SM: Wait.

SH: Just waiting?

SM: That's it.

SH: What would a typical day be like for you as you wait?

SM: Just wait, sweat.

SH: Really?

SM: Dysentery, that's what it was like.

SH: Were you struck down with this disease?

SM: Oh, yes.

SH: What did they warn you or tell you to watch out for?

SM: Well, the cooking over there, they cooked it to where the color came out of the vegetables, but they had vegetables this big, and string beans this long. ... They used ... oil, they save everything, they saved urine, everything.

SH: So that is why they had to cook it like they did.

SM: Oh boy, yes. It was a common thing, dysentery.

SH: So, here you survived being air sick and sea sick, and now you have dysentery?

SM: Yes, now I can join. [laughter]

SH: Did you have good medical facilities?

SM: Well, we had a flight surgeon who was always there. He was the one that used to give us our drinks when we came back from a mission.

SH: Oh, really?

SM: Yes.

SH: He was in charge of the alcohol.

SM: I stayed on the right side of him.

SH: Were you flying any missions while you were in India?

SM: No. In Italy we flew a couple of them, that's all.

SH: What did you do in Italy, what kind of missions were you flying?

SM: They sent us out, reconnaissance stuff, and that kind of stuff. When we went to China, they flew us there in DC-3s.

SH: Did they?

SM: We stopped at Tezpur which is just twenty miles in Nepal, and then we went over the hump. ...

SH: How was that?

SM: It's a beautiful country, it's beautiful. They were just building the road there when I was there, the Burma Road, and we went to Kunming, that's where we were.

SH: What were the facilities like at Kunming?

SM: They were like hostels.

SH: Were they?

SM: Yes, they were.

SH: How big was the base, and who was there?

SM: It was very middle-sized. They were just making a runway up there. Kunming was where the American volunteer group, the first Flying Tigers were settled down, and Claire Chennault used to come in there all the time, and Chiang Kai-shek and they were making the runway. They must have had 5000 people on there making it [by hand].

SH: Really? Truly, they made it by hand?

SM: And they did it. [laughter] Yes, they pulled a lot of tires, but they did it.

SH: Did you see Chiang Kai-shek and any of those people?

SM: No. They don't know me and I don't know them. [laughter]

SH: What about Chennault?

SM: Chennault, no I didn't see him. I used to see his plane parked there. You can always tell, he had a Navy PBY plane for his own use, and there were only 150 flyers in the Flying Tigers, that's the original.

SH: How many of you went to Kunming?

SM: The whole squadron. ... We finally got together.

SH: Your planes are in Kunming when you got there?

SM: Yes. I think so. I don't remember that, I'm sorry.

SH: What were your duties and what was a typical day like for you in Kunming?

SM: Wait.

SH: Again?

SM: Yes, everybody waits, there was no action there, although before we went to Burma, I'm sorry, yes, that's where we were, we were in Burma, we stayed there a while.

SH: Did you do any flying out of Burma before you went to China?

SM: ... Some yes, yes. Burma we stayed at Myitkyina. Myitkyina was a little town up in the hills where big game hunters used to go, and some of these crazy guys used to shoot elephants

from there, you know, big field. ... Merrill's Marauders, ... they were very, very close to where we were billeted.

SH: Did you ever see any of them, or talk to any of them?

SM: Not while they were dead. ... I got pictures of all that stuff.

SH: Are you still waiting when you were in Burma before you go to Kunming?

SM: We left Burma. As I said the Japanese air force was really decimated, but they used to come over and drop these little banana bombs just to be a pain, ... little things like this to make noise, you know.

SH: Really? So, they were still attacking.

SM: Oh yes, always when the moon was out, you always thought they were going to show up. ... We shared that field with a P-47 squadron, and they were running six minute missions through there, and one night they loaded both runways with napalm bombs, and they went to bed, and sure enough they came over and they lucked out, they dropped them, and you never saw such gorgeous fire in your life, my God.

SH: Really, you guys set this up just so you could have fireworks?

SM: Something like that. ... Funny you remember some of these things. So, finally we got to Kunming, and then we were transferred to Chengkung, that was the final base, that's where we stopped.

SH: You are in Kunming in December of 1944.

SM: Yes.

SH: Are you hearing news of what is going on in Europe at this stage?

SM: Yes, we could get news, yes. It was only by hearsay.

SH: Did you get information from other pilots?

SM: No.

SH: How did you get your information, *Stars and Stripes*?

SM: *Stars and Stripes*, yes, stuff like that. The facilities for anything that was electrical, it was no go. We flew our homing device that you could fit in a waste basket, would you believe that?

SH: No.

SM: Yes, I didn't believe it either. That's how I got lost one night, and I had to bail out of the plane at 24500 feet.

SH: You and your pilot?

SM: Both of us, yes, and I almost didn't get out of the plane.

SH: What happened?

SM: Well, as I told you, inside here, there's supposed to be all electronics, but they weren't electronics, light bulbs they were. We decided that we were going to bail out after being up in the air six and a half hours, and when you're up that high, you use less gas, and you don't have to worry about running into anything, and the air is very thin, and the pilot waited till the last minute and we made a pact between us that he's going to turn around and flash his light and give me a minute to get out. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SM: ... We had intercoms. Well the time came to do it, and I turned around to open my hatch in the back, it didn't open. So, I turned around I said, "John," and I saw John go over the wing.

SH: Oh no, he already jumped out.

SM: If you ever had a lonely feeling being alone--that was it. It took me I don't know how long, I finally got it open.

SH: You have to stay where you were and get that door open?

SM: Oh boy, I finally got it open, and as I was going out, it hit me in the eye, I almost lost this eye there.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes, and I came down, it must be twenty minutes it took me to get down, you fall down at a fall rate of thirty-two feet per second, and you have to go as long as you can to get back into oxygen, and I landed in a rice paddy up to here.

SH: Oh my, above your waist.

SM: I was worried I'd be in a lake or a tree or something like that. I climbed up, it took me thirty minutes to get up over that, and I laid down and I went to sleep. I shouldn't have done that, you're supposed to bury your chute, your parachute. I fell asleep and in the morning I heard people talking, and standing over me are four or five Chinese people, and I had that flare gun on my back, and they saw it, and they took care of me like I was their son.

SH: Did they really?

SM: It was absolutely amazing. It took me five, six days, I think to get back. They got me back all the way ... to Chengkung.

SH: Really? They walked you back?

SM: ... It was a sedan chair, like a safari, and I walked and everything else. They were wonderful, and every night I had a banquet.

SH: Did you really?

SM: Yes.

SH: Wherever you stopped they had food?

SM: Oh yes, everywhere. They said that a Yank was coming, before the towns, each one. Most of them hadn't seen an Anglo-Saxon person.

SH: Really.

SM: I walked over a bridge that was 2000 years old, they told me, and they had, it was wintertime, and they cut the sleeves here. ...

SH: Oh, that is how they kept it warm. Did they give you one as well?

SM: I didn't want it.

SH: Now, what happened to your pilot?

SM: He found the plane, he looked at the plane, he told me this afterwards, and he looked at the hydraulic fluid, they knew where the plane was, and he thought, "Poor Seymour, what happened to him?" ... He got back to Chengkung also, but at the end of my journey getting back, it was by boat, by sampan.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes, and there was a major somebody, what the hell was his name, but he was expounding on Jefferson and Lincoln, he spoke English.

SH: Oh, really?

SM: Yes.

SH: He was a Chinese major?

SM: Chinese major, yes, and finally he stopped the boat, and I was on a little step to get off, and the captain of the boat, so-called "captain," I see the steps, about a hundred steps up this way, and he kept pushing me out, so I said I better go. I got up to the top of the stairs and I looked around, and ... there was a telephone booth there on the corner. I walked over, and picked up the phone, and said, "Do you have an English speaking operator?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Tell her an airman is at this place, I just bailed out, could they come and pick me up from the embassy." He said, "Yes," and a half hour later I was in a car driving away.

SH: No, kidding. What town was this?

SM: ... It was Chengkung.

SH: Oh, it was in Chengkung.

SM: Yes, right in Chengkung.

SH: They took you back to the embassy or to the base?

SM: Base. Then, I saw Johnny. [laughter]

SH: He was already there?

SM: He was surprised to see me, yes. So that's it.

SH: What an adventure.

SM: How do you like that story?

SH: I like that.

SM: Okay. We'll do it again sometime.

SH: What had you been told to do in case you had to bail out?

SM: The first thing they tell you to do is to hide your chute, so nobody knows you're around, and we always used to go with a belt full of things to use and do. They were Benzedrine tablets to keep you awake for three days if you had to keep going. There were cigarettes, there were condoms--because that's all you think about--and two sheets of toilet paper, that kind of stuff. ...

SH: How were you supposed to handle yourself if you ever had to bail out?

SM: The main thing is getting rid of your chute.

SH: Did you have any kind of map of the area or any idea of where you were?

SM: Wouldn't do me no good. So, I've lived with that for a long time. When I first came out of the service, I used to have to go through it everyday for years.

SH: And it was always that incident of coming through and trying to get out of the plane. Did you ever find out how you got lost or what had happened?

SM: I knew before it started.

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes, we had no place to turn, it was dark, and we didn't know where we were.

SH: You had gone on this flight to bomb a certain area?

SM: Our job was if the field was "wild," go after it, but that was a mistake. [laughter]

SH: When you get back to Chengkung what was your return like? Were you debriefed?

SM: Oh, yes, the intelligence officer did.

SH: How long was it before you had to go back up again?

SM: They told me I could go home if I wanted to. ... This was February 22nd of '45. My CO called me into the tent one day. They said, "If you want to go home, tell them you saw a Jap." I said, "No, I don't want to go. I don't want to go if I have to come back," but the last ten missions I flew, everything happened. The engine got on fire.

SH: How long did it take you to recover because you said you almost lost your eye.

SM: Oh, yes, it was terrible, my whole face.

SH: Did you have good medical care there?

SM: Yes, doc was good. ... I don't think he was a real doctor, but he was good. I must tell you, when I had a toothache in the service, you had to go to the dentist, and there was a traveling dentist. They used to send him all over and they took me up to him and he had ... a foot pedal for the drill.

SH: Really?

SM: It's discouraging. [laughter]

SH: Somebody else was manning the foot pedal?

SM: No, he was doing it.

SH: And working on your teeth at the same time?

SM: Yes.

SH: What kind of facilities did you have there?

SM: We had open like, lean-tos, you have in camp, you know, but the whole front was open. It's fun because when you want to shoot rats, you just lay in bed and shoot them.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes.

SH: With a .45?

SM: .45.

SH: How did you celebrate the holidays?

SM: What holiday?

SH: Were you ever able to celebrate Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?

SM: No, didn't at all, only the big bases had that stuff. ... They used to shortcut us on everything. They took the good stuff first. I had to wait for a pair of jump boots because if you have to bail out, your shoes come off. ... They used to shortcut and take them first, ... and wouldn't get any further than the mess hall, and we had trouble getting it.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes.

SH: This is in the end of February. How soon did you fly again after this?

SM: Not much later, no, but everything happened.

SH: Well, tell us about that then if you can.

SM: When an engine caught on fire, we just about got out in time.

SH: You had to bail out another time?

SM: We used to run missions up to Hangzhou which was like a two hour flight from Chengkung and we caught flak one day, and it came right, ... I'll show you pictures of it.

SH: What kind of protection do you have sitting back in the back of the plane like that? Any?

SM: No.

SH: Do you wear your chute at all times?

SM: Oh yes, two chutes, one in front and one to sit down on just in case.

SH: Are you still flying with John, the same pilot?

SM: Yes, I did all the way through.

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes.

SH: Did your mail catch up with you?

SM: Yes, always got mail. Mail you got, yes. Mail and cigarettes--Marlboros, my wife used to send me Marlboros. You'd be surprised how many dates I picked up with the red tip.

Constance Mitterhoff: Cigarettes were hard to get. Anything I could get, I sent to him, so if they were red-tipped, he got them.

SH: Was there anything else that you asked to be sent to you?

CM: He never asked for anything.

SM: You used to send me some things.

CM: Chocolates, and cookies and food, miscellaneous things that he could use there. I don't know if it ever got to him right, but it was sent. It was hard times to get stuff out then.

SH: You were talking about the last ten missions. The plane catches fire, you get all this flak, is that the same mission?

SM: No, it was different. ... We saved them one at a time. [laughter]

SH: What else happened?

SM: That's enough. ...

SH: Now, what were your targets at this point?

SM: Well, most of the targets were horses and personnel. Japanese had a lot of horses, I hated that, I really did. I didn't care about the Japanese, but to go after the horses bothered me. ...

Then, Tommy Harmon, the football star, he was in CBI too then. He flew and he's famous for shooting up the wrong village. ...

SH: So, did you know about that at the time?

SM: Yes. Everybody knew about it.

SH: Did you ever encounter any Japanese personally?

SM: No, I could do without them.

SH: What about the Chinese, how were they living and surviving?

SM: They always survived. They're very, very hard working people, and a very good work ethic. I'll show you some pictures if you want to see, it's in the book.

SH: Are you sent somewhere else after this?

SM: Chengkung was my last stop and then we took a DC-4 down to Calcutta.

SH: Is this when the war ends?

SM: Yes.

SH: What was the reaction when you heard that the war ended?

SM: We were pleased.

SH: Was there a celebration?

SM: No. [laughter] ... I'll tell you, I refused to go on some missions after the war was over.

SH: Did you?

SM: Yes, they wanted me to push leaflets out of a DC-3, stand on an opening and push. I said, "Forget it. Put me in jail, I don't care. It sounds stupid to me."

SH: Really?

SM: Yes.

SH: What were these leaflets saying, do you know?

SM: ... Well, it's about the peace.

SH: That was the first mission you refused to go on.

SM: Oh, yes, I wouldn't go. I don't care what they did to me.

CM: Which one was that darling?

SM: ... When they wanted me to throw leaflets out of a plane.

CM: Oh, yes.

SM: You got to be crazy, you fall out, that's all you need. [laughter] After all that. ...

CM: Okay, here's the book.

SH: I'll put this on pause and we can look at the scrapbook for a minute.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Some of the materials that we've seen so far, you've written to a newspaper, you saw a newspaper article on the company in Trenton that made your parachute. What was the company?

SM: (Fashion Fox?). You could see I got a certificate.

SH: It became the Caterpillar Club for those who successfully bailed out planes, because of the silk parachutes.

SM: This was the 10th Air Force I was then, CBI I was in, and the 14th Air Force.

SH: And the 12th.

SM: The 12th, the 14th and the 10th, and this is a squadron symbol, CBI, and this was my wings.

SH: Those are really your wings, wow.

SM: This was made for us by Walt Disney.

SH: Oh, really.

SM: Night fighter.

SH: That's quite an insignia. ... Now we're looking at some of your identification, ID cards, and stuff.

CM: ... That was him.

SM: That's what I looked like.

CM: That's what he looked like when we got married.

SH: We have a picture of the wedding announcement.

SM: This is me and this is us, and this is me.

SH: This is a beautiful scrapbook that you have here.

SM: This is out in California. ... This is the Air Force Academy in Colorado. We have a stanchion there with this.

SH: Oh wow, it has got a picture of the plane, and then the CBI, and then the different Air Corps that served there.

SM: That's a P-40.

SH: Did your plane have a name?

SM: Black Widow.

SH: Did you name the planes individually?

SM: No.

SH: Here are pictures of you in front of the Sphinx and the Pyramids.

SM: All these guys are gone now. ...

CM: They weren't much older than Tom [referring to Thomas Duffy]. You weren't much older than Tom. In fact, I think you were younger.

Thomas Duffy: I am twenty-three.

CM: You were were younger than you are. See how fast things change?

SM: Some of these photographs are amazing.

SM: This is our plane here.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We have just seen a plane that was completely flipped upside down, and you said the man walked away with a hundred stitches in his head.

SM: Yes, he was lucky, he's very lucky.

SH: The flight surgeon dispensed alcohol.

SM: There was no ready, no ... emergency room. You had to wake him up to do it.

SH: He also dispensed a shot of whiskey after you came back?

SM: Or two.

SH: Or two.

SM: Or two. That's my other son.

SH: That is a picture of a monkey. [laughter]

SM: This guy was a test pilot for Bell, ... and every time we went out on a mission, he managed to have something wrong and turn around and come back. He was right. Only the young ones were stupid.

SH: He had that test pilot experience, right. Some of these aircraft were in sad shape. Now, that picture is on board ship.

SM: It's on board ship. I think this is coming home.

SH: What did you come back home on?

SM: A liner.

SH: Did you?

SM: The *West Point*.

SH: Where did you leave?

SM: Calcutta.

SH: How did you get from China then to Calcutta?

SM: I took a DC-4 to Calcutta.

SH: You left your planes there in China.

SM: We left everything there.

SH: When the war ends in the Pacific, you were still in China?

SM: Oh, yes.

SH: What was the celebration like?

SM: I don't think there was much of a celebration.

SH: Really?

SM: We were happy, and glad to go home.

SH: What took so long to get you back home?

SM: There were a lot of people out there. There's John. That's me. ...

SH: You had houseboys in Burma and India, did you also have one in China?

SM: Yes, this is Bhamo, that's as far down as I went in Burma. They had a railroad there, the center of the country was Chinese going into Japanese and going into Chinese and at this point down below they used to switch. That's my son.

SH: This is the picture of him with the monkey again.

SM: Here is my guy.

SH: That is your houseboy. Did he decide he liked cigars?

SM: Cigaro.

SH: Did you ever keep in contact with Cigaro?

SM: No. This guy died.

CM: You used to get letters from the mayor of one of the towns you were in.

SM: ... This is Suez.

SH: Was it difficult to get film developed? Did you see this or did you have to send it away?

SM: No, they have a photography set up there, they used to do it for me.

SH: What kind of censorship did you have on your mail?

SM: We had a censor with us, the officers did. I used to hate that--stay out of my business.

SH: Really?

SM: Yes. This is the ship we came on, ... HMS *Puncher*.

SH: How soon did you start having reunions?

SM: They caught up with me in 1993, and they used to have a National Night Fighter get together every other year. ...

CM: You are talking about the national, not the squadron.

SM: No.

CM: But then you went to the one for Chennault when his wife was there in Washington. What was her name?

SM: I forget it, the one that owns the airline. ...

SH: When did you get back to the United States?

SM: ... I landed in the States on my birthday, October 29th.

CM: He went in on his birthday and he came out on his birthday, isn't that amazing?

SH: You said you refused to take that flight where you were going to be dropping leaflets. ... What did they do to keep you busy until they could send you home in October?

SM: Drop leaflets.

SH: You said they left all of the planes there.

SM: Oh yes, they left a lot of stuff there, it was cheaper than bringing it back. Most of them saw a lot of work, they did a good job. ...

SH: Was there security on the base?

SM: Oh, yes. ... The Chinese guards used to wear bandoliers with bullets in them, and one idiot tried to hit one on the ground. He blew himself up.

SH: It was the Chinese who provided the security for your airfield.

SM: Oh, yes. I'm very, very grateful to them, they treated me beautifully. Really, they did.

SH: They sent you back to Calcutta. How long were you in Calcutta before you got a ship back?

SM: Not long.

SH: Did you come back with everybody that had been stationed there with you in China?

SM: A lot of the guys were sent somewhere else, I didn't find that out till much later. ... Some of them did radio work and stuff like that, but I was very lucky.

SH: What sort of awards did you earn?

SM: I have a Distinguished Flying Cross.

SH: What was that awarded to you for?

SM: The amount of missions. I have two Air Medals, same thing. I have five Battle Stars. I have a Presidential Unit Citation. I have all the Republic of China War Memorial Medals, and all that stuff, that's it.

SH: Were you awarded these in person?

SM: I had to go after them myself.

SH: Did you really?

SM: Yes. ... I really should have gotten a Purple Heart for my eye, and my CO told me, "It wasn't in combat." I said, "What the hell am I doing up there for? I almost lost my eye there." The only reason I wanted it was for points. ...

SH: To get home, yes. You said that you had a lot of letters and were able to send them back to Mrs. Mitterhoff. What about the other guys? Were they well taken care of so to speak or were there people who were really suffering from, you know, "Dear John" letters?

SM: Oh yes, they had that. These things happened there almost every day. There was a guy next living space, in Chengkung and about ten o'clock at night, crying and screaming. His brother was on a submarine that was lost, and he just couldn't handle it.

SH: It was his brother that was on the submarine?

SM: Yes, that happens periodically. I had another guy that was supposed to be shipped home and he's waiting for a plane ride and dopey stuff, he took a ride with somebody else, and the plane went in. All that kind of stuff. We had two twins in our outfit, they never were allowed to go up again together, and one of them [died].

SH: Really?

SM: Those things happen. It happened almost every day.

SH: You talked about the difficulty when you came back with post-traumatic stress syndrome, how did it manifest itself for you?

SM: I had a jumbo case of agoraphobia. I used to cry for no reason. It took me five years to get through that. It was the worst time in my life--worse than the war.

SH: Because you didn't understand what was happening to you?

SM: Nobody knew. At that time, all they knew was Miltown. That was the choice drug--Miltown (a mild tranquilizer). ... And nobody, the VA didn't do anything.

SH: Did you go to them?

SM: There's nothing. There's still nothing.

SH: From Calcutta, what route did you take to get home then?

SM: ... Up and back through the Canal, and through the Mediterranean, and through the Atlantic.

SH: Was the ship full of guys that were in good health?

SM: Oh, yes. I think they must have had about 3500 troops on that going back.

SH: Really?

SM: It was a big boat.

SH: What did you do for entertainment? Were you playing cards?

SM: Had a lot of gamblers.

SH: Really?

SM: They had big games. [laughter]

SH: Did you gamble?

SM: No, I don't gamble.

SH: Had you been a smoker?

SM: Oh, yes, big time.

SH: Yes.

SM: I used to, but you get a ration of cigarettes once a month and I never smoked, I smoked cigarettes. ... They gave out cigars too, and I stood at the end of the line, and ... that's how I got my supply of cigars. Cigarettes were very cheap, they were only a nickel a pack.

SH: Did a lot of people do a lot of drinking?

SM: Yes, yes I did. [laughter]

SH: When you came back what were your plans?

SM: I didn't have any. I was a little bit mixed up. By that time I was married, really married, you know, and everything. I was a mess, I really was.

SH: When you came back, you came back into New York?

SM: We came back, yes, New York harbor, sure. Then, they ferried us over to Camp Kilmer. That's where we were, and before we left everybody was jubilant and we weren't paying attention to what we were doing, and I heard somebody say, "Raise your right hand," and everybody raised their hand. About three weeks later I get, "You're in the Reserve, thank you for five years."

SH: Oh, really.

SM: Yes, that was it, and they caught me on it, and when the Korean War [came], I had to go down to Fort Dix for a physical to go back in. If I would have gone in, I guarantee you, I wouldn't be sitting here. My luck was starting to run out.

SH: Were they able to give you a medical deferment?

SM: I had a little blood pressure. I remember the sergeant said, "How bad do you want to get in, lieutenant?" I said, "Don't do me any favors."

SH: By now you are a lieutenant?

SM: I was a 1st lieutenant. ... I should have been a captain, but the promotions are also allocated, who grabs it first. [laughter]

SH: Did you ever see any friendly or enemy troops besides the Sudanese and the Chinese?

SM: I ran across a lot of German prisoners in Casablanca. They used to make cigarette lighters, we used to buy them from them.

SH: What were they making them out of?

SM: I don't know. I hated them. ...

SH: When did you first hear about the death camps in Germany? Did you hear about them before you got out of the military or while you were in China?

SM: There were rumors about it then.

SH: Were there?

SM: That was a terrible thing, awful. It's amazing that some people don't believe that happened. It's terrible.

SH: Was this something that was in the *Stars and Stripes* to let the troops know?

SM: I'm not sure if I ever saw that in there. ... I don't remember that too much, but I sure got my fill after the war. ... A lot of cuckoos in this world.

SH: You come into Camp Kilmer, when did you get to see Mrs. Mitterhoff for the first time?

SM: That day.

SH: That day she was there?

SM: She was there. I had to go home. I forget how I got there.

SH: When you first got back, did you go right to work or did you go on unemployment?

SM: No. I wasn't fit for anything for a while. I just tried to get together.

SH: What did you do to overcome this?

SM: I don't know, but it worked. It was terrible.

SH: You weren't able to work?

SM: Well, I wanted to.

SH: What did you do?

SM: I was ... drugged--Valium and stuff like that--in order to function. I couldn't sit in a barber chair.

SH: Really?

SM: I couldn't go to the movie.

SH: Was it because you had to sit still?

SM: It's just any confinement. So, it passed. I'm very lucky.

SH: Where did you work when you first came home?

SM: The first job I had when I came home, I worked for my father-in-law--big mistake.

SH: Really? What did he do? What was the business?

SM: He was a bus manufacturer, bus repair, he had a very good business and he was good at his field. He did it all his life, and he retired when he was forty-five years old.

SH: After you worked for your father-in-law, where did you work?

SM: My brother and I went into printing business, which we were partners. In partners there can only be one boss, and we were together, I guess, ten, twelve years, and I couldn't handle it. I became a salesman.

SH: What was your product?

SM: Anything I could get my hands on.

SH: I thank you for talking with us today.

SM: It was a pleasure talking to you. I'm really glad you came. You too [Tom].

SH: As I said, we have not spoken to anyone who was in night fighters in the CBI. I'm glad you could share your experiences with us.

SM: And I thank you for it.

SH: Thank you, and thank you for your service.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 7/13/2012

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