RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GORDON PROUT

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Gordon Prout, on June 21, 2005, in Tinton Falls, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth …

Peter Asch: and Peter Asch …

Susan Yousif: and Susan Yousif.

SI: Mr. Prout, thank you very much for having us here today.

Gordon Prout: Okay.

PA: What can you tell us about your father and his upbringing and where he was born?

GP: Father was born in December of 1898. He was a World War I veteran, worked for the New Jersey Department of Transportation all his life until he passed away back in November … of 1962. I don't know what else to say about him other than that.

PA: Did he ever speak about his World War I experiences?

GP: Not to any great degree that I recall. War ended 1918, he was twenty-years-old, I guess, at that time. I don't remember any specific details that he went into, other than the fact that he was in the service. I don't know how long. I really can't say very much more about that.

SI: What about your mother? What can you tell us about her and her background?

GP: Mother was born in August 1900. She was of French Canadian descent; parents were, I think, both born in Canada, or maybe not Canada, maybe up in New England, somewhere where there were a lot of French people. I think she worked as a secretary for an insurance company for a few years before she got married. She passed away in December of seventy-four, she was seventy-four years old.

PA: Did they ever tell you how they met or about the courtship?

GP: I imagine they probably went to high school together, I guess, although I don't remember any specific, if they said anything, maybe I was too young to remember it. I would guess that they probably were in high school together, same as my wife and I, that's where we met.

PA: Where and when were you born?

GP: I was born in Bernardsville, New Jersey on June 12, 1922. Had my birthday about nine days ago.

SI: Congratulations. Did you grow up in Bernardsville?

GP: … That's where I was born and I found out my father and mother and my older brother and I all drove out to Montana in 1923. I don't remember anything at all about that trip, … being a

year old, or a year and a quarter, something like that. I remember, just by talking about that. … We have a box of medals that we got from the Jack Dempsey-Tommy Gibbons Heavyweight Championship fight on July 4, 1923 in Shelby, Montana. That's where we were. My father said he and Jack Dempsey sparred together in his training for the fight. He was, I don't think he was actually part Indian, but he was liked by the Indian people out there and Jack Dempsey was afraid if he beat him up too badly, he might get in trouble with the Indians. Jack Dempsey did win the fight and retained his championship, and then we came back to New Jersey again, and soon my younger brother was born, and some months after that we drove back out to Montana again. Once again, I don't remember. I might have been two, two and a half, three years old, and I can't remember any details at all about having been there. We moved to Long Branch, New Jersey, back in mid, or later '20s and I lived there until I got married. We didn't leave Long Branch until 1955 when we moved to Monmouth Beach. After twenty-seven years in Monmouth Beach, we moved to Tucson, Arizona, spent twenty-two years out there, until we came back here a couple months ago.

SI: You mentioned that you have two brothers. What are the age differences between the three of you?

GP: My older brother was born August 27, 1920. He's going to be eighty-five this August. Younger brother was born Christmas Day 1924, and he passed away about five years ago. He had gone to Rutgers. He worked for a utility company up in Connecticut for thirty-five years, I guess, before he retired, traveled all around the country in a motor, one of those Winnebago-type of thing. I think, he said they got to every state in the Union except, I guess it was Hawaii, the only one they didn't get to.

SI: So your father was an amateur boxer?

GP: No, no. He was just a young six-footer, probably might have just met Jack Dempsey out there and they probably just kind of sparred a little bit.

SI: Do you know why the family went out to Montana? Was it business?

GP: I'm not sure. My father's grandfather was out in the gold mining. They were out in, I'm trying to think what state it is. My older brother, he tracked us around. He went to Montana, he went down to where they were, down in this, I wish I could remember the name of the state, but he was a part owner, or worked in this gold mine thing and they had a elevator. He was coming back up from down the bottom of the mine and something went wrong and he got killed. I guess the elevator pushed right into the top. Whether that had anything to do with Montana, I'm not sure. I'd say I don't remember anything about all that stuff and what little bit I heard over the years, half of it I've forgotten, I guess. But it was gold at that time that they were involved with; unfortunately, my great grandfather got killed before we could make a lot of money. I don't recall any more details.

SI: So your growing up was mostly in Long Branch. What was Long Branch like in the '20s and '30s when you were a child?

GP: It was a nice little town. We enjoyed our life there and, I guess, it might have had ten to fifteen thousand people total at that time, I guess, if that many. It had a nice broadway, nice street, nice stores, a couple of movie theaters, had the greyhound dog racing down at the beach, and, of course, the beach was quite popular back in those days. Long Branch was one of the top vacation spots in the country back at the turn of the century. In fact, I have a book here that talked about all the people that spent time there, presidents and, you know, there were a good many rich, wealthy people who vacationed and summered in Long Branch, I guess, back in the 1890s and the early twentieth century. It's gone down a lot since then, but it's still a pretty decent town I would guess. No more movie theaters. I was an usher at the Paramount Theater for two or three years, I guess, when I was a kid. My older brother before me did the same thing.

SI: I've interviewed a few people from Long Branch and other shore towns and they all talked about how it is so busy in the summer but then in the off season there is almost no people there and how the economy was tied into that summer vacation industry.

GP: Well, that's probably true. The summer beach, I was a lifeguard down on North Long Branch Beach for, I guess overall, eighteen years … I was at the pool, then down out on the ocean, and even when I came back from the service. I used to guard on weekends, and there were a lot of people on the beach. I never paid much attention about what happened during the winter time, other than the fact that it seems, my recollections now is that the winters were a lot more severe and cold, and whatnot, back in those days than they are now. I don't think they've had the kind of winters that we had back then, in many, many years. Worked with two ice boaters for many years, and the weather conditions that you needed to get ice on the Shrewsbury River were very tough. You need to get the cold weather, you need to get some rain, or snow, snow then rain, and more cold weather to give you the fresh water-type ice on this river, and they are out there with their ice boats having a great time. I hadn't seen an ice boat on the Shrewsbury River for fifteen years, I don't think, maybe even more than that. We had here in 1946 or seven, thirty-three inches of snow, something like that, in Long Branch, and I also remember when, the first house we lived in, Father told me to go out the back door and see what the temperature was. It was cold out, I opened the backdoor and looked at the thermometer; it was fifteen below zero. That's an all-time record that was set, it's never been equaled since.

SI: I've also been told that there were severe hurricanes.

GP: We had our occasional hurricanes, none of them were as severe as they get down in Florida and places like that. The tide comes up, and water floods the roads, and whatnot, and you get some trees blown over, but the tide was more, when we lived in Monmouth Beach; you have the east wind blowing, northeast winds, southeast winds, for two or three days the tide keeps getting higher, the first thing you know the water is up in the street. Back in 1963, we ended up with three and a half feet of water in our cellar in Monmouth Beach and the speed boats going up and down Riverdale Avenue with two or three feet of water out there. My son used to help the mailman deliver mail with a rowboat. They had another storm after we were in Arizona. They had a storm in Monmouth Beach, Long Branch, I think it was in the '90s. When we came back during the holidays to visit, they took us out and showed us all the damage that was done. There's one house there, between where we were and the beach, it had a boat there thrown by the

storm right into the kitchen of the house, went through the door and the window. When you see what happens in Florida, this is very calm compared to that I would think.

SI: So you went to elementary and high school in Long Branch?

GP: Went to Gregory School, kindergarten to the fourth grade, then to North Long Branch School for fifth through the eighth grade, and back then the high school was from the tenth to the twelfth so … the ninth grade I went on to Morris Avenue School, that's what they usually call the freshman year high school. I don't even remember what they called it then. It was just one stopover between getting out of the grade school and getting in the high school. Graduated from high school in 1940.

SI: What were your interests as a student? What were your favorite subjects there?

GP: Other than my swimming, and whatnot, in high school I played the drum in the … school band, and would be the way-in the football games, played in the orchestra, and the drums. I don't know why, I was never much of a musician, but I got into that somehow or other, I don't recall how, and I wasn't much of an athlete at that time. I had fallen down roller skating, and broke my leg when I was about eight-years-old, I guess. It was a pretty severe break. My leg was healing up two and a half inches short when the doctor discovered it and they had to break it loose and start it out again, still a half inch short. In fact, when I first went to high school I decided I was going to go out for football, and I was four foot eleven and a half, weighed ninety-eight pounds. I walked into the place and a friend of ours, who was an assistant coach, said, "Get out of here before you get hurt." That was the end of my football career. Other than lifeguarding for all those years, and swimming, and whatnot, that's about the length of my athletics until I got to college. I swam on the Rutgers swimming team for … three years. We were first, one of the only undefeated seasons we had at Rutgers in swimming, beat Princeton.

SI: How would you rate your education in the Long Branch schools? Do you think it prepared you well for college level studies?

GP: I guess so. I was having my troubles in the ninth grade, I think, through college algebra. I mean, it was kind of tough to go, so when I went up to high school the following year, they stuck me in a general math course. I was doing so well at that, when I got in geometry, solid geometry, trigonometry, I was doing very well. But I had missed out on a couple of courses I needed for college, so I had to go back for post graduate courses and took another math course and, I think, Spanish or French. I think it was French you needed a year of that, I guess. But I've never had any problems as far as the type of education they had. It was fine as far as I can see.

SI: How would you say that the Great Depression impacted your life?

GP: My father worked for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, highway department, they called it back in those days, and he didn't lose his job, he kept working, and I was only six, seven, eight-years-old at that time. I don't recall too many details about what it was like. As I

say, he wasn't out of work. We had food on the table all the time, and I'm sure that it was a trying experience for everybody, but I don't recall too much personally about it.

SI: Do you recall seeing its impact on Long Branch or seeing friends' fathers out of work or people losing their homes?

GP: I can't truthfully say I remember anything like that. I probably remember more after it was over than while it was, I think, it was 1929 was the crash of the stock market, people jumping out of windows, and as I say I was seven at that time and that's probably old enough to know about it, I didn't really spend much time thinking about it.

SI: According to who you talk to, it seems like the Depression lasted almost up until the war in one degree or another.

GP: Like I say, I'm sure the people that were in businesses, and the stock markets, and whatnot, they were a lot worse off than the average people that were, you know, had a job they stayed with to make ends meet. I don't recall any feeling that we were in any real serious trouble. Things were all cheap back in those days anyway. I think one of the sections in this book they had mentioned about the prices between 1990, or 1995, and what was back in 1925, or something like that, and it's quite a difference in price, fifteen cents a dozen for eggs and houses were, I think, one of the houses my father bought was $3500.00. Automobiles were $600.00 for a new car, $700.00. Of course, people back in those days didn't make the kind of money they make nowadays, obviously. It was an unusual time, I guess, but like you said, maybe the beginning of World War II was what got everybody back in, you know, businesses, jobs. Everybody was back to work.

SI: You may have mentioned this earlier but what did your father do specifically for the highway department? Was he an engineer?

GP: He was in the real estate end of it. He was a title examiner. He had title searchers all over the state, in every county seat. He used to go visit and pick up their stuff, and whatnot, and it was all about getting a right-of-way for highways. In fact, he was still working for them when he passed away in 1962. Although that was a mistake on our part, I guess. He had gotten cancer and then … if he had retired, my mother would have gotten a better financial settlement and pension than she did since he was still working. In fact … I was with the Department at that time, too, when I got a letter from them saying that it would be better for him to retire, and it was either the day, or the day after, that he passed away. He had a State car, and, in fact, he usually takes us with him once in a while in the car when he traveled around different places during the summer. He enjoyed his job, and, I think, he was quite well-liked by everybody. In fact, there's a letter I came across just recently from the Commissioner at that time to my mother stating, you know, how they felt, how well-liked he was, and whatnot.

SI: Do you recall in the years before the attack on Pearl Harbor, anything that you knew about what was happening in Europe or Asia? Was it a topic you discussed?

GP: Well, we knew there was a war going on. We knew that Germany had invaded Poland and other European countries. It was in the paper, it was on the news. Of course, there was no television back in those days, but you had radio and when you went to the movies there was always news things … of what was happening, and I'm sure we were interested and concerned about what was going on and didn't really think about being involved in it ourselves at the time until Pearl Harbor came. We used to read about sending all the metals and stuff that the US businesses were sending to Japan, and they said that was a bad thing to do because they were using it to build ships and stuff. But when we were at my mother's house, my future wife was with us, on a Sunday afternoon in 1941, when the news came over about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I was nineteen years old at that time, and knew pretty well what was going to happen, and I remember I went to see a movie not too long after that Wake Island, and if they had had a Marine recruiting office out in the lobby of that theater, everybody would have signed up coming out of that movie because they just, you know, it made you feel like you got to get over there, you know. Hollywood did a great job of making the Japs look like real rotten people. They started the draft and, I never did sign up for the draft because I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. It was in June of 1942, six months after Pearl Harbor, I got sworn in and they said, "Go home and wait for us to get in touch with you." That was in June, June 17th, I think it was, 1942, and in December '42, after spending the summer working on the beach lifeguarding, I got a letter from the Army saying I had to report on the 7th of January to Nashville, Tennessee. My father drove me out to Trenton on the morning of the 7th, and I got on a train there and went down to Nashville, Tennessee, and they had an exam-type testing, dexterity, written tests, … and they ask you, this was in the Army Air Corp you had the choice, if you want to be a pilot, a navigator, or bombardier. So that summer before I went, who shows up on the beach one day, but one of the fellows that graduated from high school with me in an aviation cadet uniform, and all of us got a big kick out of that. I told him I was getting ready to go, too, he said, "You were so good in math in high school," he says, "you should put in to be a navigator." So I, you know, gave that some thought that when I got down in Nashville, I, although a great majority of the people put down pilot as their first choice, I decided, "Well, I better, maybe I'll put down navigator as my first choice, pilot second choice, bombardier a third choice." So that's what I did. The results came out and they said I qualify for all three, "but since you put down navigator first, we're going to send you to navigation school." So that's what happened. I went from Tennessee to Monroe, Louisiana where they had navigation school. We had nine weeks of pre-flight and eighteen weeks of advanced navigation training. Graduated, got my commission as a 2nd lieutenant on the 15th of August, '43. Came home for, delay en route for a few days, and then was sent back down to Louisiana. They call it phase training, got hooked up with a crew of, a pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, myself, and six crew members for the flight crew for a B-17 Flying Fortress. That was in the end of August, first of September, and we trained down there until about the first of November. We were supposed to fly over to England; got up to St. Louis and the group that we were supposed to get our planes from and fly were taken over by somebody else before we got there. So we came East, to Fort Kilmer, on the train, and we left on the *Queen Mary* to go to England. I think we got 15,000 troops on the *Queen Mary*, … at thirty-five knots that ship went all by herself, no army or navy ships, or anything like that, just the *Queen Mary*, and it took two and a half days to get from New York to Scotland.

SI: Before we go on to your service overseas, could we just follow up with some questions about your training in the States and before that? You said you graduated from high school in 1940. Did you go directly into Rutgers then?

GP: No. As I said, I had to take a post graduate course in '41, and, of course, after that summer Pearl Harbor happened and that's when I signed up for the Army Air Corps; spent another summer lifeguarding. That September of '42, I got a job as a taxi driver and spent three months doing that until I got that letter from the army saying that I had to report on the 7th of January '43. That's when the army service started.

SI: Living in Long Branch after Pearl Harbor, how did the war affect the Shore area? Were there blackouts, was there rationing, that sort of thing?

GP: Yes. Gas was rationed, everyone had a sticker in their windows, an A, a B, or a C. They'd give you so many gallons of gas a week, and, I think, food was rationed out to some degree. You had to put blackout, top half of the headlights, on the cars with black tape, and they had people patrolling the beaches during the day and night. They had built some of those guard towers along the beach area in places and they used to have guards and people watching for anything that might happen along the water edge. I would guess that there might have been German submarines, although I never recall hearing of any real incidents with the Germans involved, or whether they might have been around, I don't know. We drove around at night with, like I say, with the headlights dimmed, especially if you're near the beach. I remember one night driving towards Ocean Avenue in Asbury Park and, couldn't see very well, I hit a curb and bounced up over the curb because I hadn't seen it. Fort Monmouth was busy then, had a lot of troops and a lot of people were roaming around town. In fact, some of them used to give me the bad eye because I wasn't in uniform at that time. You know, I had been sworn in, I had a card with my picture on it, the whole thing, and I had a little Air Corps insignia that I used to wear on my shirt, but the fact that I wasn't in uniform, maybe people thought I should have been. I don't recall ever any real problems with that, but it just seemed like sometimes there was somebody who would want to know why you weren't in the service. That didn't last too long.

SI: Did the whole gas rationing issue affect your job as a taxi driver at all?

GP: Not that I recall. I was with Golden Taxicab Company in Long Branch at that time and I am sure they had the wherewithal to get as much gas as they needed. Most people, you know, like my mother had an A sticker for her car. That meant that you got, five gallons a week or something like that. I don't remember the actual numbers. But I know that my wife says she gets them for shoes and things like, that they had to get special stickers. Food was, I guess. I don't recall ever being hungry or anything like that as far as, you know, not having enough food.

SI: You mentioned that you met this friend who was in the Air Corps, who talked to you about becoming a navigator, was there anything else that led you to the Air Corps? Anything that attracted you to the Air Corps?

GP: … I remember hearing about all the different people, or I've read about or heard about they are in the Air Corps, the Army, and the Air Force was part of the Army, back when it was the

Army Air Corps. I just thought that would be a good place to go during the war. So I went up to Newark, where they had their recruiting people, and took the test and got signed up. I figured that would be a better way to go than wait around to be drafted. As I say, I never got around to signing up in the draft because I had already signed up in the Air Corps, before it was necessary.

SI: What was the process of getting into the military? Was it a shock to you to go from civilian to military life?

GP: I wouldn't say it was a shock.

SI: An adjustment?

GP: It was different. You know, I …

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SI: Please continue, you were talking about the transition.

GP: Got down to Nashville, Tennessee, and, you know, the same way you see in the movies, you walk down the line, they give you your uniforms and shoes and whatever they were handing out, and my first recollection of being in the Army is standing out with an officer in front of us saying that they wanted some volunteers to do certain things. So he said, "Who wants to volunteer?" I stepped out and volunteered, and somebody else stepped out, and somebody else stepped out, and this captain, he says, "You get back in line. I want you, I want you, I want you." He picked the ones who hadn't stepped out to do whatever it was he wanted to get done. That was my first recollection of being in the Army. Of course, they always say, "Never volunteer for anything," but I don't think that's the right way to look at it. Then we got there and went down to Louisiana. Now we're aviation cadets and everything. You're in school, you're learning all about what it is you have to do, what you have to learn to be a navigator, and a lot of flying. There are different types of navigation you had to learn. Pilotage, where everything, you look on the map, you're looking on the ground to see where you are. You're dead reckoning, where you're using flight information, how fast you go, what direction you're flying in, what the wind shift might be, and celestial navigation, you do that at night where you shoot the stars, and it was interesting. One day we were flying what they called a, they wanted to calibrate the airspeed meters, so you'll fly at low altitude and you're flying from one point to another point and you're keeping track of that, and you're timing it, so that you know how fast it was that you went from point A to point B, and then they turn around and come back in the opposite direction and you're doing the same thing, and the plane was bouncing, because it was hot and muggy, in the low altitude, and the two other navigator trainees in the plane with me would be sick to their stomach. They were all over the place and I just stick my nose up to get a little fresh air once in a while but it didn't bother me at all. When the flight was over, the navigator instructor came back and he said, "You must have an iron stomach." He said, "I don't know how you could sit back there with that going on and not get sick yourself." But it didn't bother me, although it did smell pretty bad. The navigation training, let's say it was twenty-seven weeks, started, I guess, it was the first part of February, graduated in August, August 14th. I think it must be more than eighteen weeks and, twenty-seven weeks, something like that. I know we went from the end of

January, until the middle of August and then you got your commission, got assigned to a crew, had phase training, you're in the States, and over to England you went, to start flying in the Eighth Air Force. It was October, we were getting ready to leave to go to England, when they had the Schweinfurt mission over in Europe, when they lost so many planes, and so our group, when we went over the following month, were replacement crews for all the ones that had gotten shot down in that Schweinfurt mission. We got sent to the 305th Bomb Group, the 364th Squadron. Every squadron had about twenty-some planes, and then you started your mission plan. We used to, every night we'd go in, ready to go to bed, and there's a sign on the back of the door saying what crews were going to be flying the following morning, and what time, and the tour of duty at that time was twenty-five missions, bombing missions. … You get up in the morning, you go where they had the pilots and whatnot, and they showed where the mission was going to be, from here to there, they had a map on the wall, and you're flying over to someplace in Germany, and where your bombs are going to drop, and then, the navigators went in and they got briefed on what they had to do, where they're going to go. Usually we started, get out to the planes, it was probably still dark, quite early in the morning, and they take off, and the first thing you know, there you are, the whole group together, maybe sixty to seventy B-17s, and they'd fly around while they connect up with other groups that are coming and they had as many as 2000 planes on some of those missions going over from England to Germany, bombing different targets, and this was in, starting in November and December of '43, and my first mission was to Norway. The Germans had some places in Norway that they had taken over for submarine stuff, and whatever else, so we flew a bombing mission up to Knaben, Norway. My first mission there was, it wasn't our whole crew, just me, because somebody, the navigator on this crew was off for some reason or other, they needed a replacement, so they asked me to go. I still remember we got up there, dropped our bombs over the target, we were starting to head back, and all of a sudden one of the engines took off out of control, and before the pilot could get things back in order again, we were 10000 feet and ten miles away from the rest of planes. We were all by ourselves, and one of the gunners in the plane was flying his twenty-fifth mission. This was his swan song to get back to the States, and here we are out in the middle of the North Sea all by ourselves, and he came up to the nose of the plane to find out how we were going to do, you know, to get back, so I told him. I told him not to worry about it, we were going to be all right, and we got back and he was very happy about that, and that was the only mission I flew without my own crew. The other missions we always flew together, and I never remember ever talking, or thinking, or being afraid of what we were doing. It was just something that we trained to do, we were going to do, and we wanted to do, and we want to get the war over, and when you got home at night, you looked on the door, you were hoping your name is up there so that you could fly the next morning. We, I forget which mission it was, we came back, another time all by ourselves. What happened is we ran out of oxygen. We were flying towards the target, we were flying at about 30,000 feet, you need oxygen, and so we had oxygen bottles, so we got the oxygen bottles out, and we're using them until we dropped our bombs over the target and then we took off to get back. The first thing we had to do was go down to 10,000 feet, or less, so that we didn't need oxygen anymore. We got into the clouds down there and we were heading back towards England; kept getting lower and lower to stay in the clouds and all of a sudden we break out into the open, no clouds, sunshine, and I got my maps out and we were right over Dunkirk and the Germans were down there shooting everything that they had at us. Bombs busting all over the place, and the plane was in great shape, so we took it right down, ten feet above the water, and the Germans were behind us, they were shooting, and our gunners were shooting at

them. I look out to the side and, all of a sudden, here's a plane out there doing this, it was a British Spitfire, and as soon as that Spitfire showed up, the Germans took off. Our guys were starting to shoot at the Spitfire, I'm yelling over the intercom to cease fire, because it was a British Spitfire pilot out there. We got back safe, without any further trouble, and it was our second trip alone on the way back. Then our last mission, our ninth mission, we had dropped our bombs down at Ludwidshafen, Germany, and we were coming back and we had some mechanical problem, so we were all of a sudden, all by ourselves again, and we were heading back across France, heading towards England, and a couple of German fighters, Messerscmitts, intercepted us and started shooting at us, and we were down around 1500 feet altitude when the pilot said, the plane had gotten hit, "bail out," and I had never used a parachute before. Although we always had them with us we never really thought much about them, other than the fact that we needed them. So, I was there, right behind me the bombardier, the pilot was still up in the cockpit, the door was open. I bailed out, and ten seconds later, fifteen seconds later, another chute came out. I just assumed it was the bombardier, and when I didn't see another chute come out, I just assumed that the pilot didn't get out, and the plane dove in first, exploded, and I made it in some kind of a duck pond, or something, hurt my ankle, either broke or sprained my ankle badly, and I couldn't walk. The French couple there were close by, and they were telling us to go to their house, "*Venir à notre maison, Venir à notre maison*," this farmhouse, and one of my gunners landed close to where I was, and he helped me out of this pond and we were probably, on my hands and knees, heading down towards this house when about fifty German soldiers come up and they see us and that was the end. Got taken prisoner and ended up in a prison camp for sixteen months. That was an experience. I think the first, one night we spent in *Dulag Luft*, I guess it was called, and stayed there for maybe three or four days. They interviewed you a couple of times, wanted to know where you were from, and what your name was, and your serial number, and all that kind of stuff, and they knew more about me. They knew the plane, what the insignia on the plane was, so they knew what bomb group I was from, what squadron I was from, and we got on a train and it took us up to, spent one night in Berlin, the next day we got to *Stalag Luft One* up on the Baltic. When we first got there, there was about 500 POWs there, most of them British, and they kept enlarging the camp; when the war was over, they had almost 10,000 there, all Air Force officers. The enlisted men had gone to another camp. The Germans were, they were better, as far as the prisoner thing, than they were in Japan, or Korea, or Vietnam. In fact, just recently there was a Medal of Honor winner that came here to give a speech, and he'd been a POW in Vietnam for six or seven years. I went up to him after he got finished; I told him, "Your story, it makes my sixteen months in a German prison camp seem like a vacation," because they had a really rough time. The Germans were strict and you had to do what you had to do, but at least they were following the Geneva Convention pretty much. Time went on and on and on. We were rooting, we used to go outside when you'd see B-17s flying over heading towards the target, and everybody would cheer and jump up and down, and the Germans got annoyed at that, so they made the rule then. They made the rule when there's any air raid sirens around you had to be in your barracks with the windows closed. Didn't want to see us celebrating. Sixteen months later we were liberated by the Russians. They were coming from the eastern part of Germany and they were getting closer and closer, this was in May '45. All of a sudden, one day, the Germans up and left. We saw them, all had a Red Cross parcel with them, and they were leaving … heading West. They were going towards the British and the American forces that were coming through France, and they didn't want to get caught by the Russians. The Russians ended up coming into camp a few days later and they were a real rough-looking bunch

of guys. They were coming from Siberia, and other places like that, and they came in and they talked to the leading American and British officers who were there. The CO of the camp, I think he was a full colonel, the highest ranking American there at the camp. Eisenhower was in France, sent word he wanted to fly in and evacuate the camp, and the Russians said, "No." They wanted us to have to march out, walk out, and Eisenhower wouldn't stand for it. He wouldn't hear of it; he said, "We're going to fly in there, we're going to take those POWs out." So on the 15th of May, our barracks had been designated as MPs, put a cloth thing on our arm with an MP on it, that's all we had, and they wanted everybody to stay in the camp. But quite a few of them wanted to leave, so they went up to where the water was and … there was a boat, or a raft, or whatnot, and they were taking off towards the west, hopefully, to get back to the American forces, and we had no way of stopping them, you know. We told them, "You're not going to do that," but you had no real authority and no sidearms, or anything like that, so they were going their way, and we had to stay there, and then word came that they wanted everybody in groups of fifteen, I think it was. There's an airfield about two miles south of the prison camp, and, all of a sudden, these groups of B-17s come flying in, landing, and the troops had walked over there, fifteen in a group, and fifteen guys on a plane, take, off, the next one. They did that all day long and, two or three days I think it was, they evacuated 10,000 POWs; flew them back into France, Camp Lucky Strike. They were showering us with all kinds of food. We had turkey and gravy, mashed potatoes, and ice cream sundaes and sodas, and they were trying to fatten us up, I guess. One day while we were there, this plane came in and landed, I think it was from my old bomb group over in England, so I got to the pilot, asked him if I could fly back with him when he went back. He said, "sure." So I finally made it back to my airbase after sixteen months, and stayed there. We were put into groups and they were sending them back on LSTs, anything that would float they were putting these people on and taking them back to the States. We had such a big group that, we were in South Hampton, and our group was put on a train, went up to Scotland; we came back on the *Queen Elizabeth*. So I had both of the *Queen Mary*, on the way over, and *Queen Elizabeth* on the way back, and got back around the 30th of June. I can still remember to this day what a thrilling, emotional feeling I had sailing past the Statue of Liberty on the way to New York harbor. That's where my wife was, we were still single at that time, we got engaged, and got married on the 29th of July. I still to this day, you know, we had gone down to Atlantic City, rested. We had orientation and they wanted to know what you wanted to do, "Stay in the service?" Because in the meantime the war in Europe was over, but they were still fighting in Japan, in the Pacific. Your choice was to get out, or go over to the Pacific War and fight over there. There was a lack of communication maybe. I decided, "Well, I'm sure my bride didn't want to stay in the service, so maybe I'd better get out," and that was about the time the atomic bomb was dropped over in Japan, and the Japs surrendered, so I decided to get out, and it was sometime years later, she said, "I wish, I think I would have rather stayed in." My brother, older brother, he stayed in the service. He was career military. He got out for a short time, after World War II, and then when the Korean War started he went back in, and he stayed in until he finally retired back in about 1980, I guess. He retired a full colonel; spent about eight years as a military attaché over in Sweden, and my younger brother, he was also in the Air Corps. He was a navigator on a B-24. He was over there after I was, and they went down in the North Sea. I think they were testing their machine guns and one of them went wild and shot one of the engines off the plane somehow. They had to bail out. There he was in, I think it was in December of '44, it must have been about that time anyway, he was in the North Sea, ready to freeze to death and drown, and he was about to lose consciousness, I guess. He said when he

woke up he was on a minesweeper. Some of these British minesweepers apparently had been in the area and must have seen the parachutes. They had picked him up before he passed away, and then, back in maybe March, April, he got shot down again, and he ended up in the Zeider Sea over in Europe. He ended up in the Netherlands area somewhere, I guess, and he got captured by the Germans. It was about six weeks before the end of the war, and so he got captured and they were there for a relatively short time before the war ended. He came home before I did. By the time I got home he had already gotten married. … My older brother, he was in the service and was down in Georgia, this was in January '44. He had been going with a young girl here in Deal sometime in high school, after he had gotten in the service, but they had some kind of a outing or fall, so he left. He was down there in Georgia and going with a nurse, or something down there. The other gal was a nurse, too. He got the word that I'd been shot down. He decided he'd come home and talk to Mother and Father, tell them that, you know, whatever he wanted to say, and driving up from Georgia toward New Jersey, he gets close to New Jersey, he called up *Jersey City Medical Center*, and talked to his ex-girlfriend, and so he picked her up and they were heading down, back down to the Shore here where my folks lived and on the way down, he said he finally popped the question on whether she'd marry him. She didn't say a word all the way down, until he got almost down here, then she finally said, "Yes." So I've always said ever since that time, "I'm the one responsible for your happy married life because if it hadn't been for me getting shot down you might never have done what happened," and they, more or less, agree with that, too. The military was, he enjoyed his whole career. As I say, he fought in World War II, he fought in Vietnam and in Korea, and my younger brother, he passed away about five years ago. He had an abdominal aortic aneurism. The rest of us are just getting older and older.

SI: Can we ask you a few more questions about your time in the Eighth Air Force and then in the POW camp?

GP: All right.

SI: Had you had any kind of survival training, or anything to prepare you for being shot down?

GP: Not really, not that I can recall. In fact, I was never even actually taught how to use a parachute, other than the fact that you snap it on and you pulled the ripcord when you jump out. Never got any training, never did it before. My first jump was for real. They had taken some pictures, little pictures about this big, like you put on like a passport, or something like that. We had those. In fact, I had them in my back pocket of my trousers and that was supposedly if you ever did get shot down or captured you might be able to use that picture to get some kind of an ID, or something, but I don't recall any training or anything like that. When we got to the prison camp itself, it wasn't long after we got in this barracks that they decided they're going to try to dig a tunnel to get out. I've seen this on television and then this *Stalag Seventeen*, I think, is one of the movies that they had. They used our room, they took the stove, it was a coal stove, or cook stove, they took it off, and then they had an opening underneath there. They took the thing off, and they started the tunnel, just like they did in the movie. They dug, they'd come out, they'd bring the dirt out and they go out and sprinkle it around, so it wouldn't be obvious, or something like that. Our barracks was the last one on the row. It was about, maybe, another thirty to forty feet to the barbed wire fences, and they went down about eight feet and they started to dig out until they got outside of where the fence was, and … we had these wooden slats

for our beds, and everybody gave some of their slats so that they could have them to help prop up the walls so it wouldn't cave in or anything like that. They took these cans and put them, stuck them together so that they had a pipe like and they were pumping air down into the thing, to make sure they had some decent fresh air down there, over to where they were digging. They had made candles out of belt and margarine or whatever I think we had that would burn for a little bit, and they were doing this digging for day after day after day, and anytime the Germans were around they had to close it up, and even to the point where they were starting to tell people what they were going to do. Who was going to go and what kind of uniform they were going to try to put together; where they were going to go, they had a map or something, and about a day, or maybe two days, before the big escape was supposed to take place, the Germans came in and they discovered it. They probably knew it was there all along because they had seismic graphs around, I guess around the camp so they could tell that there was digging going on, and they came in and, the ones who were already in the tunnel, they got them out and put them in solitary confinement. They pushed dirt into the thing and got rid of it. That was the only time we tried it out of our barracks, although they did try in other areas of the camp, the same thing, but they all ended up about the same way. I never hear about anybody that actually escaped and got away. A few people got shot and the ones that didn't get shot were brought back and put in solitary confinement for whatever period of time they wanted. There were other methods of trying, and the movie I saw, … I think it was that *Stalag Seventeen*, they depicted it pretty well, you know, in some cases. One story I heard about one of the camps, they had a springboard there, they made a springboard and they would jump off, hit the springboard, and hop over the fence. Because those fences were, I'd say, eight feet high maybe, and it was a double fence. It was, you know, a fence here, inside all rolled up stuff, and another fence here so that they weren't easy to get through. But no matter how they did it, they always seemed to get caught. Like I said, I don't remember in sixteen months ever hearing of anybody that got away and escaped and got back. The only one was my pilot. Like I said before, the co-pilot and I were in the same room, in the same prison camp, and for six months we mourned about him because we just assumed that he never got out of the plane, and about six months later, we get a postcard in the mail and it's from him, back in the States. It was the bombardier who didn't get out, and the ball turret gunner never got out, but the pilot got out and he got into the French Underground, and, after I got back home, after the war was over, he came East, landed at Fort McGuire one time, and we went and picked him up. He spent the day with us. The story he tells is unbelievable. He got rid of his parachute and he got into these hedgerows like, he got in this hedgerow and the Germans were coming and he said they were looking, with a guy going down with a thing sticking it in the hedges, and he was ready to stand up and surrender, and just before this guy got to him, with the pole, somebody called him over to talk, and he came back, and he was just on the other side of him, he starts prodding the hedge again, just missed where he was. So when they left, the French got him in the French underground, and he spent, I don't know how many days it was, but he was working his way down over the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain and back to the States. I don't know whether he went to England first, then back to the States. So he stayed in and he was a test pilot, and when he came up to visit us that's what he was doing, he was a test pilot. He was coming East for some reason or other and then we saw him, and, of course, he'd gotten married when he got back, and I don't know, it was about maybe a year later, I got a letter from his wife saying that he had been killed in a plane crash testing the XB-47 and it crashed and he was killed instantly. Better off, I said, if he got caught by the Germans, I think. Life in a prison camp was tolerable and time consuming, and because of the Geneva Convention, officers didn't

have, they couldn't make them work. GIs they could use them to do things, if they wanted to, but not commissioned officers, so we sat around all day. I played a lot of bridge, little Monopoly once in a while, and, basically for the most part, most of the time we had enough to eat. We got these Red Cross parcels. Every parcel had a can of corned beef, a can of spam, some concentrated oatmeal type of thing, D bar, chocolate ration bars. They had about five packs of cigarettes, box of prunes, maybe raisins, or something. This was a Red Cross parcel that was supposed to last you a week. Of course, we had about fifteen guys in this one room in the barracks, everybody, you know, we'd make meals, and whatnot, and the Germans everyday would give you some bread and some ersatz kind of butter, or something, and rutabaga soup, so we had enough most of the time to satisfy yourself, until, I think it was spring, spring of '45, when they started, they didn't give you all your Red Cross parcels. I think they were taking them themselves, and everybody was pretty hungry then. I think I lost maybe ten or fifteen pounds.

SI: You mentioned that the guards were not so bad. How were the guards? How did they treat you?

GP: Everyday you had to go outside and line up in front of the barracks so they could count you. They knew how many people were in every barracks. They had ID cards, everybody had their picture taken, and they had a card telling them where they were, what their name was, their pictures on it, the room number, and they had these in a little wooden carrying case like, and so everyday you go outside and they'd come along, they'd count you. … This and that, the thing was if they had the right number, that was okay, you go back in the barracks. If there was somebody missing then they'd have to go and start looking for him, and this went on everyday. One day they had come out, they had two of these boxes with all these cards in it, two German soldiers, for some reason …

-----------------------------------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO------------------------------------

SI: This continues an interview with Gordon Prout on June 21, 2005 in Tinton Falls, New Jersey. Please continue, you were telling us about how they brought out these boxes.

GP: For some reason that we don't know, they set these two boxes down and they went somewhere, I don't know where, but they went somewhere and a couple of POWs were there, and they see these two boxes, so they picked them up and took them into one of the barracks and they broke them up and burned them, and when the Germans came back looking for these boxes and couldn't find them, everything broke loose, and they came screaming in, and everybody came out. They went in, to search, every barracks and they couldn't find these boxes, and everybody was locked out on the parade ground … out there, and these guys they started building little piles of dirt and putting a stick in it, probably like they were burying something. This got the Germans annoyed even more, so then they came out there and started raking up everything, looking for these cards but they never found them. We're probably lucky that somebody didn't get shot. The only incident that I recall, like I said earlier, the Germans made you stay inside anytime you were in an air raid type situation, you had to be in your barracks, and this one day the air raid siren sounded, planes were going over, and everybody had to get in the barracks and this one guy had been in bed taking a nap, he was sleeping and he didn't realize it. He got up and didn't realize that there had been an air raid. He walked out of the barracks

and one of the guards in the tower shot him. Understandably so, I guess, some of the Germans who lost people in air raids, and whatnot, were a little on the unhappy side and, you know, probably would look for an excuse to do something like that maybe. This one officer that we used to have come all the time, he was an Austrian and he seemed very pleasant, and he was not like some of the ones you saw on television, or in the movies. He seemed like a decent sort of a guy, and I don't think he was as much of a Nazi as some of the actual Germans themselves, and we used to do whatever we could to annoy them. One of the things was the cigarettes. Now, the Germans got very few cigarettes, they were apparently rationed. Some guys would wait until the German soldier got in the barracks, for whatever reason, take out and light up a cigarette, take a couple of pulls out of them and throw it down on the floor and stomp on it, you know. You'd just annoy the devil out of the German soldier, you know, for doing something like that. They used to come at night, the Germans, they'd send somebody in under the barracks so he could listen, hopefully somebody would be talking about something that they might want to know, and this one day, they saw this guy coming and going under the barracks, night time. So they were out in the hallway of the barracks, there was an open seam down the middle of the floor, and they had gotten a big bucket, full of hot water, and when they saw this guy go under the barracks one night, they came out and they run down the hall dumping this hot water down this crack in the floor and the guy, he got so mad, he turned up his gun and he shot right up to the floor and to the roof of the barracks. Didn't hit anybody, but he was angry, I guess. For the most part, you know, we got along, and we used to get mail, and we used to be able to send out cards or letters every month, and parents could send you cigarettes if you wanted them. I was a smoker at that time, back in 1944. I guess, I started smoking when I was seventeen years old. I stopped smoking when I was thirty-four years old and haven't had a cigarette since March 26, 1956. So I pretty much now call myself a non-smoker. When I was out in Arizona, my wife and my brother-in-law insisted that I get former POW license plates for my car, so we got them. Two times in twenty years, I was stopped at a traffic light one day and I heard somebody behind me toot the horn and I looked in my rear view mirror and some guy was back there doing something like this. He got out of the car and he walked up; I opened the window of my car, he put his hands, took my hands and he said, "God bless you," and that had never happened to me before, and it never happened since, and I was just overwhelmed by it. One other time, this is more recent, maybe a couple of years ago, I'm driving home one day, and I pull in the garage, get out of the car, and a couple of minutes later the doorbell rings. The guy had his car in the driveway, this guy, he'd followed me home. He saw the license plate, he followed me all the way home, wanted to know all about it. They are two incidents in twenty years that might make you think somebody might appreciate what you did.

SI: In general, how was morale in the camp?

GP: I would say it was tolerable. I don't recall anybody saying anything really too bad about it. When the food went down it was, I mean, you stop and think about all the things you wanted to eat when you got home. That's when I used to say, "I'd like to go to *Max's* and have a hot dog." I don't know if you ever knew about this *Max's* down here, it used to be on the boardwalk. In fact, we were there only last week. You know, I would say that most people tolerated it, I can't, it's hard to reflect back and think of everything you did or didn't do. Like I said, I know we played quite a lot of bridge and we had in the first room in our barracks, a Catholic priest, Father Charlton, he was captured by the Germans when the Germans went into France, the Dunkirk

area. This was back in 1940, or something like that, he was captured and he was in our barracks in the prison camp and it was very nice to have someone like that around. He'd come in and he'd sit and talk to you, or he might be up sitting up in the lounge, in his bunk reading, or whatever. The only problem sometime was somebody might use a little language that they should not use with a priest there, but he'd look up and say, "Sorry, Father, I didn't mean that." I guess, at that time, he was a middle-aged fellow and had been a prisoner for five years or so. You can walk around, get out and leave your barracks, you go visit. In fact I got captured in January, … it was in October, I think, I got out of the barracks and I am walking across and all of a sudden I see this guy coming, walking close to where I was. It was a guy I knew here, from Long Branch, who had been, I don't know whether he was a pilot or he was a ferry commander, they used to fly over and the paratroopers would jump out.

SI: The C-47s?

GP: Yes, and he got, somehow or other he got shot down. This was about, like I say, about ten months after I was there. I thought anybody that I had known, who was flying at that time, would be long gone by then, then he shows up. That was funny to see that. He's still around. As a matter-of-fact, … that last time we were here, this past Christmas, or might have been last summer, I forget which, it was last summer probably, it was my older brother's roommate in college, he was a doctor, he's retired now, but he said that this fellow would like to get to see me again. Now that we're back, maybe I'll try to get in touch, and we can talk about our experiences.

SI: Was it only British and Americans in this camp?

GP: Yes. The British, they flew their missions at night. Americans flew theirs during the day, and, of course, a lot more American planes were flying over there than there were British planes and the number of prisoners were eighty percent at least American, I guess, and we had, right towards the end, in '45, and maybe two, or three, four months before the war was over, they brought some GIs in. In fact, one of the fellows … who was a friend of my brother's, lived in Tucson, and he ended up in the same prison camp I was. He was a sergeant from I forget what, I'm not even sure whether he was … Air Corps or what, but they had put these GIs in, and they were there in our camp for two or three months before the end of the war. They were the only ones that I know of. The rest of my crew, except for the ball turret gunner and the bombardier, ended up in prison camps somewhere, other than the pilot. I never got to see any of them again after that. Though I did hear from one of them. This was a number of years ago, we had got a letter from a German doctor. He was just a young boy during the war, he was, you know, eight or ten years old, but apparently he witnessed the plane, a B-17, … crashing somewhere near the border between France and Germany. Either just inside the German border or just inside the French border, I don't know which, and he apparently thought that it might have been our crew, and he wanted to know if I had any information about who, why, and where, and when, and all that kind of stuff. So I wrote back to him and told him that it wasn't our crew because our plane was shot down over in France, just about fifteen miles from the English Channel. This was the other side of France, so that it couldn't have been us. Another thing that happened, I have joined this memorial association, 305th Bomb Group, and a, couple of times a year they send out a paper, and in this one, maybe two or three years ago, this fellow from the States, said his uncle

had been killed at the 305th Bomb Group, on November 17, 1943, and he wanted to know if anybody knew anything and he'd like to hear from him about his uncle, and, immediately, it came to my mind that we were there that day. Our plane, was ready to take off at the end of the runway when these two B-17s ran into each other, collided in mid-air, exploded, and that was one of the planes his uncle was on, so I wrote to him, told him what I had witnessed. I said, "I don't know how it happened or why it happened but, you know, it happened," and I said that, "obviously there could be no survivors in a situation like that," and I said, "I didn't know your uncle or any of his crewmembers. We were relatively new, we had just gotten there maybe two or three weeks before that," but I said, "I'm sure that the others that read this article probably would be able to give you more information." So he wrote back to me, very appreciative that I had written to him, and, oh maybe a year later, I get another letter from him, and it says that some guy over in England was roaming around, and he comes across a set of dog tags in the ground, picked them up, and it's this guy's uncle's dog tags. You know, we're talking about fifty years after something happened, so he was going to fly over to England, look this guy up, and get his uncle's dog tags. I haven't heard from him since. I assume he must have done that.

SY: When you were a prisoner of war you mentioned that you were at the camp for sixteen months. How were you able to keep track of time? Did they give you calendars? Did you have a wristwatch?

GP: There was a radio in the camp. We had a radio. They used to hide and take it apart, you know, everybody had a piece, or something like that, I don't know, I wasn't involved in it. But they had this radio and everyday they'd tune in to the BBC, get the latest reports on the war, you know, before the invasion, after the invasion, where the troops were, or where the fighting was going on. In fact, we had in the front room of our barracks, somehow or other they got a big map, it was a map that showed Europe, and they used to keep track of where everybody was and where they were fighting on this map. That must have annoyed them to see that, but I don't recall them doing anything about it. But everyday they'd tune in, and then they come around to each barracks, in each room, and tell everybody what was going on, you know, what they heard from the news, especially after the invasion. Before that, you had your own method of keeping track of time I guess, you know, as far as what day of the week it was, or what week of the month, or month of the year, but once the invasion started then everybody was very interested in what was going on, and the Germans never did find that radio. Although, I think, in one of the movies they made I think they did find something. It was an interesting experience that you wouldn't want to go through again, but glad you did, at the time.

SI: Do you know if the Germans ever put anybody in the barracks to spy on you, like somebody covering as an American airman?

GP: I know they did that in that movie, but I don't recall that ever happening in our camp.

SI: Did the Germans ever subject you to any kind of propaganda? Did they ever try to tell you that they were bombing New York? I've heard stories like that.

GP: No. I think they probably put off any feelings that they had, they were losing the war, and I think they always made it quite obvious that they were going to win the war, even though you

knew that sooner or later they were going to lose. I don't remember any specific details about them saying anything about New York, or any place like that. I'm sure we would have heard about it over the radio if something like that had happened. I remember we did hear about President Roosevelt passing away. That was an unhappy situation. That wasn't too far before the end of the war, really, and the Russians they seemed like, although they were our allies during the war, they seemed like already as the war ended, they didn't want any US planes in their territory that they captured. Although they had to finally give in on that, but it seemed like the Cold War was starting before the regular war was over altogether.

SI: Were you able to communicate with the Russians at all, or have any interaction with them?

GP: I didn't, but, like I said, they did when they first got there, they did have these meetings with some of our senior POW officers. They were saying some of the problems was that they had these translators who were trying, and these Russians were drinking their vodka, you know, and the first thing, you know, they had too many drinks. They had to take this guy out, and bring somebody else in, because the first guy got soused, I guess. They didn't mingle. We saw them when they first got there. This one guy, on a big horse and a big machine gun, walking in the gate, and he was a big, ugly looking dude, I'll tell you. I'm sure that the Germans were glad they weren't there when they got there. I remember when I got back to England, like I told you before, when I got back to my own old base, they gave me an aerial photograph of the prison camp that I spent sixteen months in. I still have it. The US knew where they were, where the camps were, so they wouldn't go over there and do anything. I don't know how many they had altogether. We were *Stalag Luft One*, there was the *Stalag Luft Three*, there was the *Stalag Luft Seventeen*, apparently, and there must have been others around the country. I don't know how many total prisoners there were. Like I said before, there were about 500 when I got there and almost 10,000 when the war was over. So that's a lot of POWs. I think they indicated that, when you go over to England and start flying those missions, your chances of getting shot down and getting either killed or captured was probably around seventy percent something like that. Most of them didn't make it all the way through their twenty-five missions, when I was there, and then it went up to thirty missions, and, I think, when my younger brother was there a year or so later, it was thirty-five missions you needed to fly. He said he flew twenty-four missions, and never saw a German fighter. … That's all we saw were German fighters by the time we started to fly.

SI: There were a lot of big changes that year. Did you have any fighter cover when you were flying missions?

GP: Very little. The fighters were stationed in England, and they'd take you over part of the way, and then they'd have to turn around and come back or they'd run out of fuel. But once the invasion got there, they got air bases down in France, so then they could have fighter cover all the way from the time you took off until you came back. In the meantime, the German *Luftwaffe* got shellacked and not only were we destroying the planes, we were destroying their manufacturing of new planes, so that by the time the war ended, they had no planes to build, no planes to fly. They were still shooting anti aircraft, and stuff like that. We were bombing those ball bearing plants and the various other industries, things that they needed to make planes, were routinely destroyed during the early part of the war.

SI: Were most of your missions to oil refineries and factories?

GP: I'm sure they were, I hope so anyway. We went to Ludwidshafen twice, we went to Bremen, Frankfurt, and, you know, I would sort of think that the majority of the missions were aimed at things that were war related. I would hope that they weren't just out there dropping bombs on civilians for no good reason.

SI: I was just asking because I know that around the time you were flying your missions they had switched strategies from just bombing oil refineries and fuel production facilities. They were moving away from the idea that you could bomb a ball bearing factory and shut down the whole war machine.

GP: Yes. In fact, I have a set of … [videocassettes] made during the war. I forget the name of the guy who did the talking on it, but they were talking about the early raids on Ploesti and Schweinfurt, and whatnot, where they were going after the oil, and how many planes they lost, but we never got into one of those. I think a lot of those flights they weren't able to come back. They had to keep going, drop their bombs, and, hopefully, get into the Russian area before they had to land. One of our missions, one day, we were flying way down in Southern France, a town below Bordeaux, I don't know what the target was, it was something down there that they wanted to knock out, and we flew down and we were heading back north. There was a strong, strong wind, the wind was one hundred miles an hour, or something like that, at that altitude and the plane flew, you know, our plane could fly maybe 150-160 miles an hour, so our ground speed was only maybe fifty, and some of the groups, they got shot down by the German anti aircraft. We had the navigation system, they had these G boxes, which were radio controlled signals that you got from different areas and they'd tell you exactly where you were, and I'm getting a fix on my G box at the time, and they say, "bombs away," and I looked, and we were twenty miles from the target, and, you know, what happened in those days, the lead crew is the one that everybody followed, and when he pulled open his bomb bay doors, everybody opened their bomb bay doors. When he dropped his bombs, everybody dropped their bombs, and, apparently, this time they were, I think they assumed, they guessed, and maybe found out that the navigator was breathing over the bombardier's shoulder to see where the bomb sight was, see where the target was, and they must have hit the toggle switch, or something, so all the bombs landed in an open field somewhere and we had a long way to get back to England, and by the time we got back we were almost out of gas, and it was dark and our plane was the only plane that got back to our air base. We got back and the pilot made one pass over and then we went over this water tower. We were so close to the top of that water tower when we went over it, that you could see the rivets in the wood on the top of it, and he went around again and went down and landed. As I said, we were the only crew that got back. The rest landed wherever they could find another air base somewhere. That was the longest mission we ever flew. I don't know how the planes carried that much gas.

SI: Even though you flew eight missions together as a crew, your first mission you flew with another crew, in that amount of time were you able to bond with them? How close were you with your crew?

GP: Oh, we were very close. We lived in the same barracks, the four officers anyway. The crew, they had their own quarters, and we used to eat together and talk. The bombardier, he was older than the rest of us. He must have been twenty-eight, I was I think twenty-one or maybe twenty-two, yes, twenty-two, when we were flying together and the co-pilot might have been twenty-five, he was … a guy who used to fly over in China.

SI: With the Flying Tigers?

GP: Flying Tigers, yes. He was a pilot over there for a while before the war. The pilot was about twenty-five, I think the bombardier might have been even thirty, maybe. He might have been, I don't remember exactly. We could never figure out why he never jumped out of that plane, because he was right behind me when I bailed out. He had his parachute on. That's why we thought it was him who had gone out after I had jumped out, and why he chose not to do it I don't know, and the ball turret gunner I don't know what, maybe he just couldn't get out of the turret in time, I don't know about that either. He was just a young kid.

SI: What did you do after you got out of the military?

GP: We got married on the 29th of July. I got out of the military, I guess it was, when I made my decision about getting out, I think, it was in August, sometime after the war in Japan was over. I went to Rutgers in September of '45, and I was there three years, swam on the swimming team, and we had our first child in '47. Didn't have much fun, we were on the GI Bill there. So in '48, I decided to get a job with the Department of Transportation; started there in September of '48, got hired as a junior engineer trainee. Junior engineer trainee, that's what it was. Everything in the DOT you had to take the civil service exam for, so the first exam was for Junior Engineers. … A couple of years later, took an exam for Assistant Engineer, got that. A few years later I got Senior Engineer, and then they had one for Principal Engineer. Principal engineer, now you're a resident engineer on a construction project, and I did that for a few years. Then I got to be a project engineer, so now I've got half a dozen resident engineers working for me on different projects around, and then, finally next to the last, I got a Bureau Chief down in Trenton, Construction Practices, and I was down there for about three years I guess, and I had one more deal after that, what I wanted was to get up, out in the field again, I went up to Newark as a Supervising Construction Engineer for the Newark District, Region II in the State, and I did that until I retired on December 31, '82. That's when we left and went to Tucson. We had bought a house out in Tucson in 1981, we rented it out for a year, year and a half, and then we went out there, got there January, end of January '83, stayed there until this past April, came back East. We liked it very much out there. It was hot but we had our own swimming pool in the backyard to keep very comfortable, and, as I say, my brother was there, and we had people come out and visit us. My daughter lives here in Monmouth Beach, plus up in Bayonne, she has a business up there. She thought we were getting too old to be out there all by ourselves and she wanted us to come back closer, so we finally said, "Okay," and here we are.

SI: Could we ask a few questions about Rutgers after the war? Did you go to Rutgers because of your brother, or were there some other reasons?

GP: I would guess my older brother went there and my younger brother went there, so I was the last one, so I figured I'd try it myself.

SI: What was it like when you came back after the war and they were just getting started again? Was it kind of like throwing things together or were there pretty well-established curriculums and patterns on campus?

GP: It wasn't easy to get back into the groove, you know. We rented a room up there, I forget the name of the street now, it's right close by the school.

SI: Was it Easton Avenue?

GP: Easton Avenue, that's right. We had a couple, married couple, that had a couple of children and had a room that they rented. In fact, they had a couple of them. My wife and I rented one and another fellow on the swimming team and his wife rented another one, and we stayed there a couple of years, and, you know, being just married and trying to make ends meet, as far as money is concerned, and whatnot, my wife got a job. She was a secretary to the football coach, the basketball coach, track coach, I think it was, and she said her salary was $80.00 a month, and $40.00 a month went for our room, and the other money went to the fraternity where we were getting our meals. So we had just enough to last from one payday to the next, and, of course, the GI Bill was taking care of the tuition and whatnot. When the baby came along, and then she couldn't work anymore, things were getting kind of tight. I enjoyed working with the Department of Transportation. Like I said before, my father worked with them for a long time, and I met a lot of nice people and had a lot of nice experiences and had a lot of good jobs. Now I'm retired and getting a nice pension.

SI: Sounds like you enjoyed engineering.

GP: Civil engineering is interesting. I got my license as a land surveyor, did a lot of part-time work with a couple of different engineers in that field.

------------------------------------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-------------------------------------

SI: Do you think your experiences in the service affected your career later in life in some way? Were you able to use anything you learned?

GP: Not that I can put my finger on. You know, like any experience you have in life, you know, it helps round you out as far as your overall situation, and I think being in a war like that certainly should influence the way you live and think and feel, and whatnot. I've thought about my experiences many times over the years. You know, whether any of them has contributed as far as my advancement, or lack of it, or whatnot, I don't know, but I think I've had a very comfortable experienced life. I don't feel despondent at all. People keep saying when you get to be our age you have got to start worrying about things like that, I feel quite happy. We played a lot of golf, we're going to play some golf here. I spent my whole life as a do-it-yourselfer. Done a lot of carpentry work, plumbing work, electrical work, whatever it took to keep a house going, I learned how to do it, and I don't really have an opportunity to do that here. I gave all my tools

to my son. We brought them back East and he came up, he lives down in Richmond, Virginia, and everything I had in the way of tools he took. I think I have got a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, that's it. Anything that takes anything more than that I can't do anymore.

SI: Is there anything that we skipped or anything else that you'd like to put on the record?

GP: No, I don't think so. I'll give you a chance to get out of here before the one o'clock fire drill starts.

SI: Well, thank you very much for talking with us for so long. We really appreciate you sharing your stories with us. Thank you for your service.

GP: Thank you, you're welcome.

--END OF INTERVIEW---

Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 10/25/05
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 11/1/05
Reviewed by Gordon Prout 6/16/06