RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM I. WELLS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an interview with Mr. William I. Wells on September 11, 2001, in Venice, Florida, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak. To begin, Mr. Wells, thank you very much for hosting the project today. Before we discuss your family, for the record, where and when were you born?

William Wells: December 7, 1921, in New York City, but, I only lived there about a year, and then, we moved to the eastern end of Long Island, way out near Riverhead, which is Suffolk County, as far east as you can get, where my family had lived for several generations. Wells is an old family name out there, and so, my father returned to a farm out there which my grandfather owned, and I was raised there, until he bought a farm over in Central Jersey … in my sophomore year in Riverhead High School, and I transferred to Jamesburg High School and matriculated from there to Rutgers University.

SH: What was your father's name?

WW: George Irving Wells.

SH: Do you know when he was born?

WW: Yes, I think … it was 1890, I believe.

SH: Was there a family business?

WW: My father was a farmer out in eastern Long Island, potatoes mostly, but, a few other things, and my … grandfather owned a general store, which you saw a picture of, and, basically, that was about all there was to do. That's country way out there and the culture comes from New England, does not come from New York. It came across Long Island Sound and that's where they developed farmland. So, there's only two ways to make a living out in eastern Long Island, way back then, and that was from the sea or from the land. There was no industry at all, nothing.

SH: Did your father ever talk about World War I?

WW: Only that he just missed it. … I don't know what the circumstances were, but, he missed it, but, he said, "I was getting close, Bill." That's all I know. [laughter]

SH: What was your mother's name?

WW: Her name was Ethel, Ethel Young, and she … took training in Minneola Hospital, out in Long Island. … She got as far as the third year, and then, the flu epidemic hit, and you probably know about that, and she couldn't handle that, but, she continued nursing, mostly for doctors and private duty, until she married my father. …

SH: Do you know how they met?

WW: They're both [from] the same town and probably lived within a few blocks of each other. I don't know how my father and mother met, however.

SH: Do you have any siblings?

WW: I have one sister who's alive and she's now in not too good physical shape, living in Virginia, I believe. She lived in Jamesburg, New Jersey. She moved down there, (I think she's in an assisted living place now), … close to one of her daughters.

SH: Is she your only sibling?

WW: Well, she was the only [other child]. There were only two of us and she went to Trenton State Teachers' College and taught for, Lord, I don't know, thirty-eight years or something like that, forever.

SH: When you moved to the Jamesburg area …

WW: Cranbury. I went to Jamesburg High School, but, I really moved to Cranbury.

SH: Did your grandparents, or any other relatives, also move from Long Island to New Jersey?

WW: No.

SH: Did you often travel back to Long Island for vacations?

WW: Not too frequently, but, my [grand]father and [grand]mother were living out there, and we'd go out there on occasions, and then, finally, … when they moved to … Jersey, … close to us, we didn't go to Long Island, except, once in a while, we'd drive out there, because [we had] a lot of memories out there. In fact, one time, my grandfather owned something like fifty acres of land fronting on Peconic Bay and I remember him telling my father, … "Irv, I don't think that parcel is going to be worth anything, so, I think I'll trade it for a farm." [laughter] You should see it now. That's among the foolish mistakes we make as we go through life.

SH: You moved to New Jersey in your high school sophomore year. Before then, what had been your interests? Were you involved in the Boy Scouts?

WW: Yes, Boy Scouts. I loved Boy Scouts. I used to go to camp every summer and that was when it was seven dollars a week. Then, I got to be a tent leader, so then it wasn't anything.

SH: Where did you go to camp?

WW: Baiting Hollow, Camp Baiting Hollow was the name of it. It was in Wading River. I don't know if you know anything about Long Island, but, it was not far from Riverhead, maybe twelve, fifteen miles, on Long Island Sound, and the girls' camp wasn't too far from there. [laughter]

SH: Were you involved in extracurricular activities at school?

WW: Yeah, I played [on] the tennis team, (captain). I played some baseball. There was no football team in Jamesburg, there was in Riverhead, but, I was, you know, a sophomore. … In college, I was quite active, but, moderately so in high school.

SH: What was the transition from the Long Island school system to the Jamesburg school system like for you?

WW: … The school system in Riverhead was excellent, good teachers. The one in New Jersey, in this high school, was absolutely terrible. I don't know where they found the teachers. They made it tough for me in college. I really had to struggle, because I did not get the kind of preparation I should have gotten. Don't print that. [laughter]

SH: That is not the first time we have heard that. [laughter] During your high school years, were you always set on going to college?

WW: Yeah, pretty well in bred. I think my folks had sort of said, "Somehow, we're gonna find a way," and I just decided I was gonna go. My grades were pretty good, but, you see, the school was not good enough. … So, I think I finished second or third in the class, but, that didn't mean too much. The level of Riverhead was entirely different. By the way, (Otis Pike?), [who was] in the Assembly for about twenty some years, was … one of my classmates out in Riverhead, and he wrote a column for years for the, what's the national paper, the one that you buy all over the country, the same paper, not the *Wall Street Journal*? …

SH: *The New York Times*?

WW: Well, *New York Times*; this was started by this fellow and it's the only nationally [distributed paper], every street corner … all over the fifty states, you can buy it. You should know that, (Gannett: *US News Today*).

SH: I should know that?

WW: That's right. [laughter] Anyway, he wrote a column for that. He was on, I think, the Defense Committee and a lawyer, and there's a long story about him, and I can't talk about it, but, he was a character from way back. … Riverhead was ninety-nine percent Republican, except for (Otis Pike?). [laughter] (Otis Pike?) was the only Democrat in town. He got elected anyway, because he was such a character and so well-liked. He was an orphan. He was raised by, I think it was an aunt, and they had a summer home down on the shore that I visited regularly. He was a natural for getting in trouble [laughter] and he stayed that way all his life. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: What did you do during your summer vacations in high school?

WW: Sophomore and junior years in high school? worked on the farm with my father.

SH: Which crops did your father grow?

WW: Mostly potatoes, potato farmer. He grew other things and … [he was] a bit of a cauliflower expert. He sold cauliflower seed, which is a long story, but, he used to sell it for, like, sixty dollars an ounce, tiny stuff. It came from Holland. He was a bit of an expert in raising cauliflower.

SH: Is this something that he grew up doing in Long Island, and then, transplanted it to New Jersey?

WW: Yeah, same climate, same kind of soil. He only had two years of high school, which was the going thing at that time. I don't even know if my mother had two years high school. [Of] course, she went in[to] nursing training and I don't know how that fit in. I can't tell you.

SH: Before you went to Rutgers, did your father ever interact with the Ag School?

WW: Well, only as a farmer. He would work with the Extension Service. Money, of course, was a problem and they didn't have any. … So, I had a choice of going to State Teachers' College or, the tuition at Rutgers was like 225 dollars [if] you went to the Ag School and 325 dollars if you went to the other school. That hundred bucks, I didn't have, so, I ended up in the Ag School, and I graduated as an agricultural economist, believe it or not.

SH: Did you start out as an Ag major or did someone advise you to take the agriculture course?

WW: You mean that particular type? I wanted, really, to take business or something across town, but, I didn't have the extra hundred dollars, so, I did the best I could and that would be as close to it [as possible]. What I wanted to do is become an economist, which meant I could go in more directions [than] if I just studied agronomy, or horticulture, or something like that.

SH: Did you have a lot of classes on the Rutgers College campus?

WW: About half and half.

SH: How did you deal with the long walk?

WW: Bus, or, … one guy that we lived with had an old Model A Ford, and he'd kind of take us around a little bit, and [can I] deviate a little bit for a second? This guy was older. He played football, I think it was [at] Drexel University, anyway, some school, I think, in Philadelphia, 'til he got hurt. That was the end of his scholarship. His father owned a tavern with a gambling room in the back, so, he learned how to gamble [when he was] this high. He earned his way through [by] gambling with the Young Men's Democratic Club and so forth, downtown. He could gamble, and so, he was the one with the car and [who] had money, [laughter] all because his father knew how to gamble. He was killed in the war. He's the only one that stated he wanted to live. He had a girlfriend, he wanted to get married, so, he figured out, "Well, I'll go in the Coast Guard. I won't get killed." He ended up as a cook on a cutter. The cutter disappeared. They never heard from him again. So, you never know.

SH: Do you remember his name?

WW: Yes, Benash, Chuck [Chester] Benash.

SH: Did you visit the campus for an interview before entering as a freshman?

WW: I don't really know. I don't remember.

SH: Some men remember speaking with Dr. Helyar before entering the Ag School.

WW: I took a test; … at that time, they gave State Scholarships. I took the test, and I didn't come out too well, and, again, part of it was probably me, I may not [have been] that smart, but, part of it was because of the poor high school. So, I went anyway and I got a partial scholarship my sophomore year, I worked like hell, and I got a full State Scholarship [for] the last two years, but, I had to make up what I didn't have, and I worked. You'd take a job, you'd never ask what the pay was, you didn't ask what you did, you did it, and we did things they couldn't get other people to do, like unloading these rolls that weighed two tons, (of paper), to a wallpaper factory, and then, … other people wouldn't do it, it's too dangerous, so, they'd hire us kids. I think they paid us up to thirty-five cents an hour for doing this. …

SH: At college?

WW: This is while I was going to college. We did anything. I worked in a meat packing plant in Elizabeth, until [laughter] … they caught us getting somebody to push the time-card that we were working and were in class, and, by the way, what a horrible place to work, (in a meat packing plant). Oh, God, it's awful. It's cold, wet, damp, terrible. Anyway, at that time, … I would usher, and, after I ushered, like, a matinee, they'd hand me a dollar bill, and that's what it was. I got twenty-five cents an hour for some job. Also, the government had a, and I don't remember the name of the program, but, it was a program to assist you, I think it paid thirty-five cents an hour, and we worked as night watchmen or whatever they assigned, and I think I got, like, twenty dollars a month or twenty-five dollars a month for whatever, thirty-five cents an hour, but, that's what we did. "I don't care what it is, just give me a job." ...

SH: Where did you live in your freshman year?

WW: At the Towers. Do you know where it is?

SH: Are you talking about the Towers?

WW: Oh, you know about the Towers?

SH: I need you to tell me about the Towers.

WW: … This was on top of a building. You know, when I was going there, there were two places that the kids drank, one was the College [Corner?] Tavern and the other was the College

Inn. You know all about that? Well, the College Inn is across town, right near the Towers, unfortunately, too close. Entomology was in that building and Water and Sewage was in that building. We had all the upper floor, it was the attic, and I think about twelve, thirteen, fourteen of us lived there, and somebody was a cook, somebody was a buyer. I was a buyer one year and president of the group the last year.

SH: What did you call yourselves?

WW: You mean the group? just "the Towers." The Phelps House was an old farmhouse that another group lived in, and we had to work for the University to pay for board, nominal, and it was great, right next to what we called NJC then, [Douglass College]. We'd just walk up three or four blocks and the girls were there. We'd pretend [that] we belonged to some fancy fraternity on the other side of town. They didn't know the difference. [laughter] For my first tuxedo, we went over to Princeton. (Weatherall?) and I were about the same size. We bought one tuxedo, paid seven dollars for it. [laughter] … We shared the tux. Only one could go to formal affairs. [laughter] You know, it didn't bother us a bit. We never thought of money; we didn't care. We just had a wonderful time. … College days were very happy days for me.

SH: Who was your favorite professor?

WW: My favorite professor, oh, what was his name? taught courses that were closer to my interests. What was his name? (Krueger) I went to see him, he quit Rutgers, he said he couldn't live on the pay, and, during the war, he went down to Washington, worked at the Department of Agriculture. After the war, I visited, to see if he could help me get a job. He couldn't.

SH: Can you tell me about some of the rules and regulations that you had to follow at Rutgers? For instance, it was mandatory that you attend chapel services.

WW: We're supposed to go fifty percent of the time. … I can't remember, you had to get a card signed or something like that. The Catholics, or, I guess, non-Christians, we didn't have any non-Christians, a lot of us were non-anything, but, I think you had to go fifty percent of the time, is that right? and we would comply with that, generally. … That chapel is beautiful.

SH: They just finished refurbishing Kirkpatrick Chapel.

WW: … Of course, a lot of universities have chapels like that. Ours was very small, at the time, compared to [others]. I visited a cathedral in Duke University. Now, that's something. … We didn't have anything like that when we went to Rutgers, whatever they do now, I haven't been back in years.

SH: Well, you should come back. Since NJC was so close to the Ag School campus, did you find it easy to comply with the rules or did you figure a way around them?

WW: Now, I'm not going to tell you all my secrets. [laughter] No, they're pretty strict and most of the girls [followed them]. The only thing they'd do, they'd sign out for weekends and they wouldn't necessarily go home right away, but, generally, I think most of the girls complied. …

A lot of the girls over there didn't have that much money either and I think that they were reasonably serious about the rules. I didn't find a great deal of violation of the rules.

SH: What did you know about the situation in Europe before the United States entered the war? Did you stay abreast of the situation or were you focused on your life and studies at Rutgers?

WW: I really didn't know a damned thing about it. … I was president of the Ag Club the last year. I think it may have been, if not the largest one, [one of] the largest clubs, because every Ag student belonged to it, and the president the year before I was president … also majored in agricultural economics. It was a very small graduate department. I thought of going on and taking studies and I realized [that] I wasn't cut out to be an educator. … So many of the, (I think), … teachers in college are escapists from the real world. They're in this protective environment, and they're afraid of the competitive world, and, sometimes, … some of my best teachers were grad students, and some of the full professors, we … didn't understand; they're out there someplace, when they weren't doing consulting work and so forth. I would say [of] my teaching, … I would only grade it moderate. I was glad to get it. I'm not complaining, … but, I was not impressed too much with the quality of teaching at Rutgers. That doesn't mean I don't love the school.

SH: What kind of activities did the Ag Club take part in?

WW: Well, really, we used to have one big meeting a year and we also had an honorary society called the Alpha Zeta. Now, this is honorary, so far as you got good grades and all that stuff. We had no living quarters in our school. The Ag Club had one big meeting and maybe three or four [other] meetings, and, usually, we had some outside activity in which we'd get a department head to talk about whatever, animal husbandry or stuff like that, and I remember one I had showing us how to carve turkeys. [laughter] … Most of the speakers were associated with the University, and most of them would … try to tell us some things we didn't know, and then, we'd have a social hour. It was no big deal, but, every kid in the campus, in the Ag campus, Ag College, would usually go, so, we'd get attendance probably, I don't know, [of] a couple hundred or more.

SH: Did you ever present a project?

WW: No, I didn't.

SH: Did you have Ag Field Day at that point?

WW: Yes. No, that's a good question. I don't know for sure. I went back a couple of times to Ag's Day. I don't really know if Ag Day had started at that time, but, I did go a couple of times after the war, so, I saw what they were doing.

SH: Who preceded you as president of the Ag Club?

WW: Chuck Benash, who was never heard from when his Coast Guard ship disappeared.

SH: What was the social life at pre-war Rutgers like? Did you attend any dances?

WW: Well, we could only go to every other one, if formal, because we only had one tuxedo, [laughter] but, we got to most of them. Sometimes we'd take a girl from my old hometown. I lived close enough. However, it was the girls over at the Coop. I think the biggest fun we used to have [was] at the Towers. Those were real raucous and an awful lot of fun, and, in some cases, the girls never came back. [laughter] Oh, yeah, there were a couple of cases where we got into problems. Metzger was the man we saw. He was residential something or other. I remember getting called in a couple of times about doing a few things he wasn't too happy about. [laughter]

SH: What was it like to deal with Metzger?

WW: … He did a lot of great things, but, it's … another story, but, one time, I was thinking about quitting, and, you know, I really was looking [for] a little sympathy. He just said, "Well, you want to quit? Quit." That was the end of that. [laughter] I stayed. There were some problems at home, and I felt, maybe, I better go home and try to help out, but, he was not the least bit sympathetic. He did a lot for the University. … He set up these co-ops, I guess you'd call them, in which we pretty much … did our cooking and whatever housework. We never did much housework. … We all are very indebted to him. By the way, Phil Alampe, does that name mean anything? Secretary of Agriculture, he was also in the Towers. He was a few years ahead of me, but, he's, of course, a legend, and a lot of the boys seemed to know him. He became the Secretary of Agriculture in New Jersey. He and his wife did a TV program for a number of years. … He was, I guess, a bit of a hero to us. Many of the Aggies would go back to farms and so forth. Well, I decided that was not for me. I had a different kind of aspirations.

SH: Was there any competition between the Ag School and Rutgers College, the fraternity men and the non-fraternity men?

WW: I don't think there was any, that I know of. We'd have intramural sports, but, usually, among ourselves, so, I don't recall if there was really anything. Remember, that campus was some distance off. We didn't have cars, so, we'd go over there for classes, but, … we're split up. Some of the Aggies, of course, had money, and they lived over there in fraternities or dorms, but, I don't think there was that much interchange. We really had different classes and so forth.

SH: Did you ever go to any of the concerts that were held on campus?

WW: Yes, yes. I was never too heavy in [those things].

SH: What about football?

WW: Always football. I played 150-pound for a little bit, but, I wasn't good enough. I loved it. To this day, I love football. … To get to football games, I finally faked playing in the band. [laughter] They were desperate for people to carry trombones, so, I carried it, and we got to a lot of the games because of it. In fact, at the game at Lafayette, we had a big fight, and I busted my trombone on some wiseguy's head, and it cost me thirty dollars to get it fixed, and I had to dig it

up, because I wanted to go to some more football games, [laughter] … and, to go to the games, I would usher sometimes. You know, you'd do anything you could to earn money. I love football, basketball, tennis, golf. …

SH: What can you tell me about the freshman initiation? Did you have to wear a dink?

WW: Yeah, well, see, we had two different initiations. One was where we lived, the Towers, had its own initiation. …

SH: Tell me about that.

WW: I don't know if I should tell you this or not. Well, you had to get some panties from the girls over at the Coop, [laughter] and the worst thing was, there's a Chinese restaurant upstairs, at that time, and I don't remember the street, but, it's right in the middle of town, and there was a gong, Chinese gong, in the hall. … Part of the initiation was stealing the gong. "How the hell are we going to steal this damned thing?" So, there's a window near it, and we said, "You throw it out the window. I'll be down on the sidewalk." [laughter] So, he threw it out the window, but, he missed, and it hit the street, whoo, you could hear the noise for blocks. I ran like hell, and we returned it a few days later. We snuck it back in. … We didn't damage [it], thank God. … Fortunately, … it could have gone too far very easily, in some cases, but, it didn't, and it was a lot of fun, actually. I kind of enjoy that kind of thing, … and we had a little bit of who could drink the most beer, and, regretfully, some people don't know when to turn if off, and so, you get in trouble. Most of us know, at some point, you've got to stop.

SH: What about the college initiation?

WW: Well, that's when you wear a dinky and they put rotten eggs on you and all that kind of stuff. You weren't supposed to wash them off. It was moderate. … It wasn't like West Point or anything like that. … When I went in the Army, now, you had some real hazing in the Aviation Cadets.

SH: We will get to that later. When you were a sophomore, did you dish it out to the Class of 1944?

WW: Well, I don't know that we [did too much]. It wasn't major. … We had to wear a little hat, didn't we? and there's some rotten eggs involved. They tried to smell you up pretty well. … There was nothing that physical that I recall. I heard lots of stories about [what] went on at some of the fraternities, I can't repeat those either, but, … it was to scare them, but, not to do harm. Most of the guys used pretty good judgment.

SH: Did you go to the movies often?

WW: I ushered.

SH: What was your favorite movie?

WW: … I don't think I should get in[to] that either. [laughter]

SH: Our readers are going to wonder why I did not ask more questions.

WW: You better censor this, girl.

SH: When you were growing up, were you involved with your church?

WW: Yes. My father was quite a religious person, and, in fact, we had words about it as I got older, and … he made sure I went to church. He was probably what they call "Religious Right," now. So, it was not a happy situation for me, because he was so strict that, now, I look back and I think it affected my mother. She was kind of fun loving and he was so rigid. I think it was difficult for her. I, at sixteen or seventeen, said, "Dad, you know, we just think about things differently," and, after that, he kind of eased off on me.

SH: What do you remember about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

WW: I knew I [had] had it. I think, I'm not sure of my age, I guess I was eighteen, nineteen, I don't know which it was. … When that happened, I knew, right then, at my age, my big, immediate problem is, "Gee, I'd love to finish school." I knew it was gonna be awful tough to go back to college after that kind of thing. …

SH: Do you remember where you were?

WW: At home. It was … Sunday morning. It came on the radio, and I knew that was gonna be a problem, and then, of course, my immediate thing was, "How do I stay in college?" So, the Army Air Corps had a program in which, if you enlisted in the Army Air Corps, … they didn't promise, but, they'd try to let you finish school. So, I already had my private license flying, so, I was a natural candidate, and I was called, finally, the 28th of February, in my senior year, … which is why I don't like some parts of the Army. What did they do is took us down to Atlantic City, in a hotel, I'm scrubbing floors, [laughter] and then, I went out in the parade ground and picked up cigarette butts, and then, they sent us to State Teacher's College in Upper New York State, up on Lake Erie, no, not Erie, Champlain, and I'd have to look up the name, we slept in the basement, first ones to do it. They didn't need us all. They just wanted to keep us from going in the Navy or something else, so, they put us away someplace, doing seventh grade [work]. The teachers had to keep us doing something, so, I was taking seventh grade geography or something when I, in effect, [had] finished college. Rutgers was very good. They gave me my degree, even though I lacked a couple of months, and then, they wrote my commanding officer, who was a jerk, and said, … "Can Bill Wells be excused to attend his graduation?" I was called in. He said, "Mr. Wells, we're fighting a war. We don't have time for this kind of stuff and it's denied." Now, it did not mean that much, to me, … except it gave me a chance to visit my girlfriend, but, my parents, it would have been important to [them]. If I'd ever met that guy after the war, we'd have words. It was so silly. I wasn't doing anything then, but, that's typical of the Army.

SH: Since Rutgers was a land-grant college then, ROTC was mandatory for you.

WW: Until I got in the band.

SH: The band exempted you from ROTC.

WW: Yeah. I wasn't about to march up and down in that parade ground. I carried a trombone. I didn't play much, but, they're desperate just to have people carry instruments. I played a little trombone, a little piano. In fact, I played in a band there, at Rutgers, for a little bit. We got five dollars a night for playing dances at the Coop, etc., but, the manager claimed he had a lot of expenses, so, we didn't see too much of the money. [laughter]

SH: Do you remember who else played with you?

WW: … I don't remember now. Mostly, [they] were townies. … They were town guys and I soon recognized, unless you're a talent, forget it. There's no way. I could read notes, but, I … couldn't perform against talent.

SH: Does playing in the band exempt you from ROTC completely?

WW: 'Cause this was an ROTC band. You see, in effect, it was (ROTC?).

SH: How did you get involved with the Civilian Pilots Training program?

WW: It was advertised at the college, and … I knew the war was breathing down my neck, and I could see these poor guys, "Hep, hep, hep, hop," in the athletic fields. I'd rather be a cook than that. So, when my friend, Weatherall, said, "Hey, let's sign up for this thing," I said, "[Sure]." … He'd said, "It's ground school, you know, and it led to a private pilot's license, and you could go on. … There's an Aronca Chief, or a small plane, you started with, and then, you'd fly a Steerman or Waco, which is an old bi-wing, but, it was a great plane." That was interesting to me. So, that's how it started. … I remember all the times. I'd fly weekends and stuff like that, but, Weatherall got sick all the time, got sick all over the cockpit. He had to clean it up and the poor guy ended up a Navy deck officer. I don't know whether he got seasick or not, but, he got sick flying. … No, Weatherall was cleaning up his own plane. I wouldn't clean it up for him. I didn't get sick. He did. Why am I gonna clean up his vomit? [laughter]

SH: Was this the same guy that you traded the tuxedo with?

WW: Yes.

SH: Did you share the same plane?

WW: Not necessarily. There were a number of training planes.

SH: How many people were enrolled in the Civilian Pilots program?

WW: You mean those who took lessons out of Rutgers? I guess, maybe, a dozen of us.

SH: Did you go up together?

WW: No. … They'd tell us when they wanted us for training, and then, we'd arrange to be [there]. Like, they'd say, "Saturday, come at two o'clock," and then, we had night school, or the ground school they called it, evenings, and we'd go there [for] … an hour, two hours. We learned navigation and the rules of flying, all that other stuff.

SH: Was this program related to the military at all?

WW: Yeah. Obviously, the Defense Department set it up so that they'd have men who they knew could fly. You know, it's awfully expensive to get these guys to the point where they started to fly and, if they flunked out, this was a very expensive thing. This was a less expensive way for them to [train pilots]. It didn't mean you were still gonna make it, because a lot of guys who got their private licenses still didn't make it.

SH: Who taught these courses? Had they been pilots in World War I or were they civilians?

WW: I really don't know. It was a mixed bag and, I think, … you have a group of men who just loved flying. They're not necessarily successful men, they just love to hang around airports and flying, and they get jobs, as they proceed to get more skills, and they'd usually end up in small airlines. [Of] course, way back, they didn't have many. Some of them became pilots for commercial [airlines], and these fellows would have three or four years of training, and then, they would take training to become instructors. That was another license you got, instructor's license. It was kind of difficult and they would generally be qualified to give courses. They would have contractors who would handle these schools. They'd be a company who, … I guess, would set themselves up to set [up] a training school for the government and, I suppose, [they would be] under contract. I don't know how it was worked out, but, … I don't think the Armed Forces was directly involved. I think they simply, through some way, set up contracts for these schools to exist. I wasn't privy to all this stuff, nor did I care at that time. [laughter] …

SH: In February, you went to New York and you were forced to miss your graduation. How did your military career progress from that point?

WW: Well, let's see, I first went to Atlantic City, then, up to this little teachers' college, up in New York State. From there, I took a long train ride. We didn't have berths and things. [laughter] The trains, I think, were too old for the Civil War. [laughter] Well, anyway, Nashville was the next stop, and this was a classification center. If you said [that] you wanted to be a pilot, they performed certain tests, like, shoot a gun off near your ear, they'd give you pictures, the Rorschach Test, I think. … One of the things they do, [they] show you a bunch of pictures, and, being a young man, all I could see was sex, and I began to worry. I said, "God, they could think I'm a pervert." He said, "If you didn't respond that way, we would be very suspicious. You're supposed to do that." I said, "Thank God for that." Anyway, they'd test us and decide [that] there were some of us [who] could proceed to pilot training and others, maybe, [would] do better some place else, and then, we went to Montgomery, Alabama, and, there, we had a pre-flight, before we even got in our plane, and that was just, "Hoop, heep, hop, hoo," and

a lot of harassment, West Point kind of stuff. "You have to learn these things, 'Yes, sir.' 'No, sir.' 'Eat a square meal,' and, 'Take short steps,'" and all kinds [of harassment]. It's West Point style, and, again, I detested it, but, the point was to make sure that you could handle pressure, because, if you are gonna fall apart, it's not only you, it's gonna be other people that are gonna be affected. We went through an awful lot of crap to find that out. From there, I went to primary school, right in Avon Park, [Florida], over here. I flew Steermans over there, which is a bi-wing, a wonderful plane. … Even as stupid as we were, we couldn't get in trouble in [that] plane. "Let me turn upside down, straight up," whatever. It was just a wonderful plane, from that standpoint, and then, from there, I went to, oh, what city was it? Macon, Georgia. We took basic training and flew the Voltee "Vibrator," it was called, and that was basic training. It was a more powerful plane, did more things, it was very sturdy, and then, we went to Dothan, Alabama, for advanced, and we flew the AT-6, which was even used, occasionally, in combat. It was a fairly sophisticated plane and it flew slower than jets. Some of these jets have go so fast, pilots can't spot their targets. So, the helicopters helped, but, often you're a dead duck, flying those things. So, they even used AT-6s on occasions when you could fly down under two hundred [miles per hour]. … When you're flying four, five hundred miles an hour, you can't spot targets. A smoke bomb doesn't help, because the wind blows the smoke. So, anyway, then, from there, Dothan, Alabama, I got my wings. …

SH: Did anyone come down for that ceremony?

WW: No, no. … They'd get tired of coming to ceremonies. [laughter] There's a ceremony after every one of them, and then, the next thing, all right, you have your wings now; I could say [that] most of the young men, not all of them, would want to be fighter pilots, and they didn't need that many fighter pilots, so, then, they had to wash you out. … We flew a P-40 for a while; … it was, at one time, … a frontline fighter. It was not a frontline fighter. It was just too slow and had too many weird characteristics, … like, stalling differently in different wings and all that. … Now, at this point, [they were] trying to wash out a lot of people, and, from there, now, they said, "Yes, Wells, at this stage, we think you can do it." … Do you want all these places? … Okay, from there, I'm trying to think, I think we went to Eglin Field, which is down near Pensacola. … No, I went to Washington, DC next, and that's where I learned to fly P-47s. The terrible thing about Washington is that the social life was worse than the flying, because every girl in the United States was in Washington, [laughter] and, I tell you, I was glad to get out of there. I was sort of battle weary before I [went overseas], and then, from there, we went to Eglin Field in Florida, to gunnery school, and then, from there, we went to Milltown, New Jersey. … In fact, they still have a field they kept there as a memorial for P-47s and took some more gunnery there, and then, where the hell did we go next? From Milltown, we went to Richmond, waiting for an assignment, we were tested, physically, again, to make sure that you're all right to fly fighters and, from there, I went to Kilmer, waiting to go overseas, … but, anyway, like all young men, they restricted us, because we were about to go overseas, and they didn't know when … they'd want us to board the ship. I didn't like being restricted. So, the only girl in the place ran a dry cleaning place. [laughter] So, I'd go there, try to make some time with her. I said, "How do I get out at night?" She said, "I know [where] there's a place in the fence." [laughter] So, she told me where it was. I said, "I'll see you tonight." We agreed where we were gonna meet, but I had second thoughts later, "Jeez, I could get stuck in jail for three years." … They took to the ship that night. … I'd still be in jail. [laughter] So, they put us on a train, took us to a ship in the

New York harbor, and it was the old Cunard Line, it was the *Aquitainia* or [the] *Mauritainia*, to this day, I'm not sure which one it was, I think [the] *Mauritania*, which, you know, [was a] big [ship]. … The officers did get treated pretty well, compared to the enlisted guys. They had decks and decks of little bunks, this far apart. We kind of had double bunks, and, fortunately, the rough weather didn't bother me. As I had more food to eat, but, the guys down below, in that hold, were treated terribly, the vomit, smells, stink. We'd have to go down there, serve a watch [for] a couple of hours. I was sick just going down there. It was tough, tough.

SH: How many people were on the ship? Were there Army personnel on the ship?

WW: No. … It wasn't just Air Corps, I think, of the whole group. I'm guessing, a cruise ship, now, [can] lodge in the hold as many as 2500; I would guess, probably, five or six thousand, maybe more, because, you see, they put them so close together.

SH: Did you sail in a convoy?

WW: No. Supposedly, those ships were fast enough so [that] the submarines couldn't get at them. [laughter]

SH: Before we get to Europe, can you tell me about some of your more memorable moments in training?

WW: Well, you mean sort of unusual things. … One was, I used to get in trouble, because they'd flip a coin on my bed, and, if it didn't flip over twice, you had to march for three hours in the sun, with a backpack that weighs sixty pounds, and I couldn't get off any weekends. I was (hopeless?). [laughter] I finally got off, and we had a hotel room, adjacent rooms, and we were going to have a party. We had girls, and who got sick? me. … So, I went back to the post. I turned myself in. They said, "Mr. Wells, you don't have a temperature. We don't do anything unless you have a temperature." So, I go back and I'm feeling worse. Again, I turn myself in. So, then, they started to examine me, and then, what did they write down? "Rupture." I picked up the piece of paper. Now, I'd been standing in line over two hours, in the sun ...

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

WW: … So, anyway, that's typical of the Army. That's among many other crazy things. …

SH: Where was this?

WW: This was in … Maxwell Field. … You learned [that], in the South, they make White Lightning. Have you ever heard of White Lightning? [laughter] So, what they do at hotels, the bellhops have stuff, you know, because it's dry in some states, and so, you say, I guess, it wasn't so courteous, "Can you find me a bottle?" "Oh, yes, suh." … The first thing you did, you checked the top, because they used refills, see, the seal was broken, and then, you'd say, "Boy, take this back, now, and bring me [a new one]." "Oh, yes, suh, boss." [laughter] I mean, you know, crazy things like that. …

SH: Before you entered the service, had you done much travelling beyond New Jersey and Long Island?

WW: When I was going to college, … I worked with the Department of Agriculture … [for] a couple of summers and we would inspect fruits and vegetables for both quality and, also, for how much they were paid. I remember, Campbell's Soup, when they'd bring their tomatoes in, and the cherry crop up in New York State, potatoes, and stuff like that, and it was moderate traveling. In other words, I worked in Virginia, and [the] Eastern Shore of Maryland, and up [in] New York State, and so forth, and got paid for it, you know, like, about two dollars an hour. That was big money.

SH: What was it like for you to be in Alabama?

WW: There were a few girls around; we didn't care about the rest [laughter]

SH: Did you get into town very often?

WW: Yeah, we really did. Some towns were dead. In other towns, the people in most towns, were very nice to us. In … Macon, Georgia, … Christmastime, we had an invitation to go spend Christmas, or the day before Christmas, [at] sort of a cocktail party. There were some lovely Southern families there, with the pillars in the front of the Southern homes and all. So, the hostess asked, "Mr. Wells, can I get you something to drink?" So, I said, "Yes." … I didn't know what they were serving, Southern bourbon and all that stuff, and, finally, she said, "ambrosia." Now, I never heard of ambrosia, so, I thought, "This is something they put down before the Civil War. This is gonna be great." "Ambrosia." She looked at me, she said, "All right." Well, she brought back this thing, fruit cocktail with coconut. [laughter] So, I looked at it, she looked at me, … "You don't want that, do you?" "No, ma'am, I really didn't." She said, "Would you like some good, Southern bourbon?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." [laughter] They're the kind of memories we had. You had a lot of flying. Once, I took a plane, and I did a roll, and all oil's corked the windshield and I thought, "Jesus, this is it, boy. I'm gonna buy it." I landed all right and I find out the idiot mechanic didn't put the top on the oil spout.

SH: Did you have any close calls in training?

WW: Well, we had so many. [laughter] … I'd go cross-country, and I got lost, so, I looked for some other plane. I knew [that], probably, this plane would be flying to my home base field, so, I found one, and I followed him and got back safely. You can go on and on with these kinds of things. I think you've heard enough of that kind of stuff.

SH: Looking back, do you feel that you were well-trained and well-prepared for combat?

WW: Yeah, except for one thing. For a fighter pilot, we did not get low altitude training, … the work I eventually did was, what they called, "on the deck," very [low], and we're flying at speeds from three to five hundred miles an hour, and, because we would disturb Aunt Molly's chickens and they wouldn't lay eggs, or the cows would stop milking and stuff, anytime you did something like that, the local mayor, or whoever would receive nasty letters. "Mr. Jones's

chickens won't lay [eggs] because you guys were flying too low and the noise disturbed the chickens." So, unfortunately, we did not get the kind of training we really needed in combat, because [of] the kind of combat [we did]. One thing is escorting planes; that requires some training, but, we were doing dive-bombing and close support work. We were on the deck all the time and getting shot at the whole time. It required a different kind of training [that] we did not get. This made it tough. We lost an awful lot of pilots the first three or four missions, because, in this kind of flying, is something you were not exposed to. We learned about that over in England, where we had some of the experienced pilots [who] would try to explain the need for this, and we tried it when I was assigned to a squadron. We tried to give the new guys that kind of training, but, you need a lot of it, and we lost very heavily. So, that kind of training was not available to us and it hurt. The Germans were good flyers. They'd had many years of experience, their planes were good, and so, we were at a disadvantage. As we got more experienced, we got better. Eventually, we got better planes than theirs, not that much better, so, their loses were so high that they had a lot of green pilots, in other words, they lost their senior pilots, and all this worked in our favor, but, it was pretty tough for a while. …

SH: There was a lot of on-the-job training.

WW: Yes, exactly that. You couldn't get that kind of training here. Where would you go? You'd have to go up to Alaska, maybe, or something, some place, because, many times, I never got above tree level. Now, [when] you're flying three, four hundred miles an hour at tree level, you got a different kind of [situation]. … So, this was the … [training] that was lacking, … but, that's one of those things. You just do the best you can.

SH: When you set sail for England, did you go over with your crew? Did you have your ground crew with you?

WW: … No, no. The crew was all assigned over there. You didn't have any choice in a crew, except that, if they did something that would expose you to serious harm, you'd speak to the engineering officer and say, "I want that son-of-a-bitch off," and explain why. To clarify, a fighter pilot as no flying crew, only a ground crew.

SH: How was your unit, your flight, your squadron, set up? What was its hierarchy?

WW: Well, the immediate hierarchy is what they called a group. A group is made up of three squadrons. You'd have between thirty and thirty-five pilots to a squadron. That meant about a hundred pilots, except that the losses [reduced that number], … and, normally, … each squadron would fly a different mission, and you'd get up in the morning, and they would give you [a mission]. The ground officers would tell you, "This is where you're going," and you'd hear groans. We hate bridges, because the Germans would have very kind of .88 they could find around bridges. Groans, you know, "Not that thing again," and so, we'd get a mission. Then, you'd have to wait, the weather might be bad, and, finally, maybe at ten, eleven o'clock, they'd say, "Cancelled." That was sweating time. This was when you sat there and you thought about other things. Mostly, we'd play cards and stuff like that. We didn't do much drinking at that point. We drank the night before. So, this was the tough time. … You know the mission, you

know it's gonna be tough, and you sit there and say, "Now, it's gonna be twelve planes. How many are gonna come back?" So, that was a tough time.

SH: Where in England did your ship land?

WW: Glasgow, and [we] went in by tenders. You could not dock it and Glasgow was an awful place. It was what we call a factory town. They used a lot of soft coal, and it was smoggy and smoky, and, from there, I went to a town called Shrewsbury, and that was, I'm not sure, I would say it was north and west of London. You know where it is? Okay. Am I reasonably correct? and they had an airfield, which was grass, by the way, it was not too good for the planes we're flying, and that's where we took transition into combat flying. We had the guys who had flown combat try to work with us. One of the things we did, and this was tough, they'd overload the plane, purposely, and they'd say, "Why don't you find out what it's like, because we're gonna overload," and so, we'd be a thousand pounds overweight, and so, this was tough, and, every now and then, you'd be playing cards, waiting your turn, when your partner's turn came he won't hand of the players his personal wallet. Five minutes later there would be loud (?) and it was the owner of the wallet. That got a little tense, but, we needed the training, we had to do it. I don't [want to] get too technical, but, we had what you called water-injection in this plane, and, I don't know, I'm not an engineer, but, you would get maybe thirty seconds of extra power if you pushed this button, and it would give you another, I don't know, two hundred horsepower or something, and you learned, in tight situation, to push that thing. It was quite important in that plane. I don't know if any other planes had that or not, but, it was a powerful engine we had, eighteen-cylinder, the early models have over two thousand horsepower, later on, went to twenty-four hundred. By the way, the [P]-51, you mentioned, too, did not have that horsepower. The real difference, since you asked, is the 51 was built for long escort missions, … less horsepower, very maneuverable, good for … encounters with other planes. Our plane was developed for high altitude, had a supercharger, and we find out [that] it was very rugged. The 51 vulnerable to damage. The 47 had a liquid-cooled engine. You had the coolant would come out, and it'd be the end of the engine. We had a eighteen-cylinder radial engine, a huge monster, and you could shoot out two or three cylinders and still run that damn thing. It was tougher than nails, so, it evolved in[to] something they hadn't planned. It evolved that we were rugged enough to take the stuff when we were being shot at all the time. Our first mission, [I] came back with nine holes, and I said, "Hey, I volunteered for the Ninth. How the hell do you get back to the Eighth?" [laughter] They laughed at me. It was a very tough plane, not quite as maneuverable as a 51, but, in dive-bombing, you could stick that thing up to well over five hundred and still come out. If the bombs didn't come off, it didn't fall apart. The 51 would have a tail flutter. It was not too good for that kind of dive-bombing, but, good for the air-to-air combat. So, the Eighth Air Force used the 51, because they'd escort, … some of their missions were five or six hours long. Our plane, even with a belly tank, wouldn't fly as long. About four hours, even with a belly tank. We used, … if you didn't push it, a hundred gallons an hour. If you started pushing, you used up three hundred gallons an hour and that was considerably more than the 51. It was a monster when it came to … using gas.

SH: Where was your base located in England?

WW: Shrewsbury. I trained in Shrewsbury, and was anxious to get in combat, because I lost all my money gambling, [laughter] … and we got to London and stuff like that. … In London, everything closed down at midnight, but, private clubs cost you one dollar. … Oh, you know about that? [laughter] Then, I find out about the Scottish girls; the hell with London.

SH: I am only shaking my head to encourage you, not that I know about it. How were your planes delivered to England?

WW: … Some of the bombers could be flown over, but, none of the fighters could do that.

SH: Were they sent over on carriers?

WW: I don't even think the P-38, which was not used in Europe too much, I were flown from the States to Europe. I'm not sure what it took to fly over the Atlantic Ocean, but, it took, I think, like, nine hours or something like that, and I don't think any of them could do that. Now, you could fly up to, I guess, Iceland and someplace and stop, maybe, but, … most all of them were shipped over, … disassembled, the wings were taken off, and then, they'd assemble them over in, I guess, most of them, … England.

SH: Did your squadron come over to England as a unit?

WW: Not very often, after the invasion of France (the squadrons group were formed in England and France originally). Most of us were replacements (the casualties were very high). When you got in France, there was an old castle [that] we all stayed in for a while, where they decided where we're gonna be assigned. … You know, it was kind of nice, because we were there for two or three weeks, so, we were pretty busy with our social life. … Then, when we were assigned, we never knew where for sure. I was very lucky. This Bill Scott, who was my friend, flew all through the war, and [who] I'm gonna be joining at a reunion in Charleston, he and I were stationed in the same squadron together. They'd put you in a truck, and they'd say, "Wells and Scott, you get off," and they'd just dump you off. You didn't know a soul, necessarily. You might know someone, but, unlikely, and that was how you were assigned. You're really a replacement. I joined, I guess, about, maybe, a month or so after the landing. Supposedly, in the early part of the war, twenty-five missions, you get home. This is because that's how long you lived. Then, they moved it to fifty, because you were living longer. [laughter] So, a few of the guys got home, … but, you know, the Air Corps is pretty smart. They knew how long you're gonna live, [laughter] so, that's how they figured it out. A lot of the guys would not come back. They'd teach or something. Some of them would come back, … in the early part of the war, but, it was very chancy. … I don't know of any of them. Most of them, if they came back the second time, didn't make it. Combat, particularly at that time, was pretty rough.

SH: Did you fly more than fifty missions?

WW: No. I had fifty missions.

SH: Did you teach anyone?

WW: Only new pilots not students. This was not like a training school. My training was mostly because greenhorns would come over after the war ended. I taught a new squadron. In other words, that was after the war in Europe, we were going to the Asian Theater direct, Bill Scott and I and a third guy, all had quite a bit of time, so, we trained a new squadron, and that was, if you wanted to say, "Teaching," but, that was combat teaching. It was not how to fly a plane. It was, "How do you stay alive?" So, that was my teaching.

SH: Did you arrive in England before or after D-Day?

WW: We arrived just about the time of D-Day, … just after D-Day. Now, D-Day was June. I think, like, we arrived, like, in June or July.

SH: How long were you stationed in England before they sent you to France?

WW: A couple of months. … We hit the Continent, I'm guessing, at the time, because it was a little chilly, I'm guessing, like, September or something like that. I'm guessing at this time.

SH: Were you primarily stationed at this base outside of Paris?

WW: No, we were on constant move. Next was to St. Dizier, France, where I was stationed for sometime, and then, we moved around frequently. I've got a list of all the cities. Wherever the troops started a drive, we were. In other words, we were different from the Eighth, who stayed in England and lived it up. We had very rustic conditions. In fact, I slept in a tent, where I damn near froze to death. That's why I won't even open the window in the bedroom anymore, [laughter]. You got up, you couldn't lace your shoes, because they were frozen, and [there was] no heat in those planes. I had my buddy list the cities we flew out of. Wherever they usually kicked off an action, that's where we're needed, so, we'd pick up and fly over there, but we did get to Paris. The 8th only got to London.

SH: You were following Patton's Third Army.

WW: Only for a while. We moved around with the First, with the Ninth, with the Third. … Who is ever kicking off at that time, we would move to that place.

SH: What was your primary goal?

WW: You mean … in combat itself? The primary (time?) was, you carried 500-pound bombs, demolition bombs. You carried napalm, this is what the liberals hate. … We carried frag bombs, this was anti-personnel, to knock the people off, and, of course, we had eight .50 mm guns, and, let me tell you. … These guns fired one hundred and fifty shells per second, when all eight fired. So, when they pushed that for two or three seconds, a lot of things happened, and we also, … later, had rockets. So, in many missions, it would vary, depending upon what the target was, but, the normal sequence was, demolition bombs to blow things up, … then, the napalm to start a fire, then, anti-personnel as they were running away. [laughter] That was usually the sequence, but, it varied. We skipped bombing sometimes. We just go straight ahead and drop the bombs, because they were in some fortification. … A lot of times, … it was not just behind

the lines, we chased wherever. We loved railroad trains, loved to see the steam come out of the steam engine, and I hate to tell you this part, but, anything [that] was moving was a potential target, … and we knew there was a lot of innocent people, well, but, that's war. … You know, [if there are] people on the roads, for all we know, we don't know what they are. Anybody on a road that close to combat was suspicious, so, we'd catch an awful lot of guys. … Well, they'd be in the vehicles, … jump out of the vehicles and head for the ditches. Well, we'd go for the ditches, too, you know. A tougher target would be tanks, because the .50 caliber gun would not do it. You'd have to have a rocket to do it. That's why I laugh at … that one movie picture, [*Saving Private Ryan*]. A P-51 came and dropped a bomb on a tank and that was the end of the battle, but, that's Hollywood [laughter]. So, that's the sequence. The horrible part, there's not much publicity about this, but, we were hated so much by the civilians, because we did an awful lot of strafing, and it could be barnyards, homes, cattle, we didn't necessarily go for cattle, but, they would be in the way. … It is generally known, but, not much publicity, that we would see pilots that would be shot down and motion that they were all right. We saw them. One guy would fly low, we wouldn't all go down, because there'd be targets, and he said, "Joe seemed to be all right." We'd never hear from him, [Joe], again. We know what happened, pitchforks or whatever, used by civillians. The paper recently carried a story of his whole crew (B-17), which were beaten to death by civillians. He faked it. You see, these don't get much publicity, because it's hard to prove. We knew it was going on. So, we were told, "Look, if you're shot down, you get out of the plane, hopefully hide until you see somebody in a uniform." The people in uniform would usually try to turn you into the authorities, and then, you'd go to prison or a camp. "Don't let the civilians get you." Isn't that a horrible thing? but, that's the real life. …

SH: They were also at war.

WW: Yeah, you can understand that we were destroying their homes and all this other stuff. The Germans are wonderful soldiers, but, they can, well, I guess we all, … as we know, in the war, they seemed to lose all control sometimes, or any kind of decency whatsoever; so did we, two sides to that. There was an awful lot of [that]. For instance, you're in a tough situation and you take some prisoners, but, you just don't have the personnel to take them back to the lines. What are you gonna do with them? These things we don't talk about too much, but, war is hell. The rules of war is kind of silly. War is war.

SH: Did any of your friends who were shot down or crashed over enemy territory return? Were they able to link up with the Resistance?

WW: Very, very few of them did. I can't prove the civilians [killed them]. They could have died, but, they disappeared, and I can't say that's what happened to them. We just don't [know].

SH: What other survival skills were you taught?

WW: Well, we had a little kit, escape kit. They had a little file, to saw prison bars, [laughter] a little map, little food tablets, not much. All soldiers are told to try to get back, not to accept being a prisoner, and some of them would, some of them wouldn't. There was not a lot of pressure put on [them]. Some of them just stayed in the prisoner of war camp for the whole war. Some would try to escape and that might be the last thing you did. The French, … in many

cases, they were wonderful, but, they seemed to be willing to accept what happened to their country, in many cases, and, because of that, we found that, for instance, if you landed in France, [or were] forced to land. A civilian might say, "Come on, we'll hide you." We'd find out, two days later, the *Gestapo* would be there. They got a hundred bucks for turning you in. See, they would play both sides against the middle, hell, … and I can understand [that] their country had been through so much that they kind of lose their principles in some cases. Some of them were wonderful people, but, they weren't all trying to liberate themselves from the Germans. The girls, … I'll tell you a little side story. We hated our cooks. So, we were pretty smart. For the officers' club, we found a female cook. [laughter] She was good, but, she wouldn't serve sweet corn, because that was for animals. She wouldn't serve water, "We serve wine, we don't serve water," and she was just good. We loved her dearly. The local mayor came over and visited our CO. He said, "That woman was sleeping with German officers. I want you to get rid of her." We had to fire her. [laughter] Later, we saw her in town with her hair all cut off. That's what they did, cut the girl's hair off. Losing a french cook was worse than losing your buddy, almost! [laughter]

SH: You often lived in primitive conditions. How were you supplied with ammunition, food and equipment?

WW: You know, that was not our interest. Our interest is simply, I hate to say this, our interest is just killing the enemy. The rest were the ground officers. That's their headache, and we didn't even get into it, except [if] our planes weren't properly [equipped], and the relationship between the crews or the ground officers was a little bit this way. We all got along pretty well, you know. … I don't know what the support is for a squadron, but, there's probably 350 ground soldiers of various kinds, from armorers to the mechanics, on and on, and I hate to say it, but, … we all admit, it wasn't as close to our crew as we should have been. We [were] just too within ourselves and we didn't spend enough time with them, in many cases. We tried to. One of the unusual missions were some railroad guns, they gave us as a target. Now, railroad guns are guarded by AA, [antiaircraft artillery]. AA was the thing we were frightened of. … We knew there'd be about fifty AA around these damned guns. The crazy guy who led the mission, I think it was a major or something, instead of strafing across, to get out of the target; he went lengthwise. I thought he was crazy. So, I fired my guns continously, not in short bursts, and I melted all barrels of every machine gun, all eight of them. Normally, they were good for, maybe, three or four seconds, then, you had to let them cool off. "To hell with this," I thought. Well, I got home and I made for the officers' club. We're drinking and my armorer came in, "Lieutenant." "Yes, what's the matter, Sam?" "Do you know you burned up all eight barrels? I'll be up all night replacing those damned barrels." [laughter] Well, what do you say? He didn't know that, as far as I was concerned, I was trying to stay alive, so, [I said], "Sam, I'm sorry. I'll try to be more careful." What are you going to do? [laughter] He might fix it so the guns won't work next mission. So, you take the easy way, [laughter] but, you did run into crazy things like that.

SH: You mentioned that everyone groaned about going after railroad targets.

WW: We loved the railroads. It was bridges we "disliked."

SH: Oh, you loved the railroads?

WW: Oh, yeah, because the steam would come out of the engines. You'd shoot the engines, and then, the train wouldn't move, and then, you could shoot the hell out of the cars.

SH: Maybe I was thinking about the bridges.

WW: Bridges are the ones. Oh, you hate bridges.

SH: What other targets did you go after?

WW: Well, you can almost name it, but, it was usually near the combat line. Personnel hiding in the woods, okay. They know [they are] in the woods, they give you the target. The big concern was trying [not] to hit your own men, because we're so close to the line and the line is fluid. We were always frightened that we may hit our own people. It did happen. That's one of the horrors of war, particularly where we were, because they're so close, but, … most any kind of targets you can think of, we would [hit], … whatever was needed. Tanks. Tanks were tough, and, as I said, we saved Patton's ass a couple of times. He loved us, and he sent a jeep-load of booze to us, and that's how we got … the blue thing, the Distinguished Unit, because we made him look good.

SH: Did you participate in the Battle of the Bulge?

WW: Oh, boy, did I.

SH: Please tell me about that.

WW: Oh, shit. Can I say one thing? Patton almost caused me to go to jail. [laughter] First of all, Patton, made everybody wear a helmet. If you didn't, the MPs would pick you up and take you into the, whatever they had, the jailhouse, whatever you want to call it. I didn't even own a helmet, neither did any pilot. What are you gonna do with a helmet? [laughter] I got picked up. "Where's your helmet, Lieutenant?" I said, "I don't own a helmet." "You don't own a helmet? I'll take you in." … I talked my way out. I said, "Come on, guys." … "Oh, you're a pilot." "Yes." "Okay, okay." They loved most pilots, 'cause we saved their ass, and then, the other time, you weren't supposed to talk to any of the Germans. … The GIs would get thirty days in a (*hausgau*?) and we'd get fined a month's pay or some crazy thing. Well, you can't tell pilots you can't talk to girls, German or any other kind. [laughter] So, I talked with a German girl, … and the MPs see me, and I'm running like hell, and they're after me, [laughter] and they caught me, and they said, "You know you're not supposed to?" I said, "Yes." They say, "Lieutenant, you know, we hate to do this," and then, they said, "Oh, you're a pilot." I said, "Yes, sir." "Oh, well, we didn't see anything. Good-bye." That happened to us time and time again and a lot of us flew the Battle of the Bulge. Now, you want to talk about the Bulge; we probably did more in the Battle of the Bulge than a lot of people know, but, among the things we did, the weather was so bad around Christmas, we couldn't get off the ground, and it was, a day or two after Christmas or something like that [that] we finally got off. … Patton was close, but, the Germans had still surrounded Bastogne, and you had the 101st Airborne in there had the 82nd was close

by. … You know, these were the wonderful soldiers. We bombed the Germans continu7ally until they left for Germany or those who were left did.

[TAPE PAUSED]

… And, to this day, in any conversation, if it's the 101st, 82nd, they love me. Supposedly, and there's some truth to it, the Germans had dropped saboteurs, if you want to call them [that], whatever it is, they were dressed in American uniforms. You probably know about that? and … I was, again, at St. Dizier, and there was a rumor [that] they're around. It was dangerous, [laughter] because every guy, like the … mechanics (plane), is out there with his gun, waiting for the saboteurs, and, of course, they'd challenge each other. "Who is the manager of the Giants?" or some stupid thing like that. [If] you didn't give the right answer, you're liable to get shot. It was not the danger of the Germans [so much] as the danger to each other. We heard the rumor, in the officers' club, no matter where we went (we started an officers' club), that they wore a white scarf, but, we did, too, and that, by the way, is not to be a show-off. Our head was going constantly and it was to stop the chaffing around our necks (the nylon). So, it had a practical purpose. It wasn't to be a hot shot. A lot of people think, well, we're trying to look like hot shots. Yes, maybe, but, that was not the real reason. Our problem, usually, [was that] somebody's sneaking up behind us, so, we had to constantly watch. … The Battle of the Bulge, … we were really busy then. I (was at a Rotary Club?) once, it came up, I forgot how, he mentioned he was [with] the 101st. I went up and talked to him. He gave me a big squeeze, "I love you P-47 guys.

SH: How did you celebrate the holidays?

WW: Drunk. [laughter] I'll tell you a sidelight. I'm embellishing a little bit, but, not too much. We went to Brussels on a leave. I didn't tell you this story, did I? and we met some Limey pilots. We all got drunk together and [were] bragging about our planes. I said, "That damned Tin Lizzy of yours." So, the next thing we know, we're out at the airport. [laughter] Well, we're chasing each other all over, down the main streets of Brussels. [laughter] Why we didn't kill each other, I don't know, but, anyway, I was still half-loaded. They claim I landed my plane twenty-five feet in the air. [laughter] That's probably an exaggeration, pretty hard to believe, but, we were crazy. Oh, then, of course, the mayor or somebody wrote to the Army, and the Army passed down to … the guys who were there on leave, and the Colonel calls us in, and he said, "Is this true that you guys [did this]?" "Oh, no, sir." "I didn't think you'd do that." We'd always defend ourselves. He knew we were lying. [laughter] We had to (stall?), and then, he goes, "Oh, they told me. I just investigated this." High ranked officers would defend us, because they knew we were under a lot of pressure and we needed outlets, and so, they were very forgiving that way. We got away with a lot of things, [laughter] but, the girls from upstairs were waving to us. We're down below them. There's wires around that city, too, you know. … It's a wonder we didn't kill ourselves, but, it was fun, at that time. [laughter] It sure did relieve the pressure.

SH: Before the tape started, you mentioned that your unit had a high attrition rate. How were replacements absorbed by your group?

WW: The truck would leave off, a couple of pilots at our field, and we would try to integrate them. … There were some problems. As the pressure became more intense, some of the older guys would withhold any close relationships, but, it was mostly because of emotion. You get to know a guy and you lose him. You had enough trouble with your own emotions. So, there was a certain amount of staying away, because you've got to keep yourself in check, and some of the guys have mentioned at some of the reunions, "You guys were kind of snobby," and I said, "Not intentionally. We just had our own problems," and I think they understood, later, … but, … normally, as I think I said, we had between thirty and thirty-five pilots per squadron. We were frequently short of this because of pilot loss.

SH: How hard was it to retrain someone in your style?

WW: Well, supposedly, these were all competent pilots when we got them. The things they had to learn in combat, are the kinds of things you couldn't teach them in the US, and so, usually, one of the senior [pilots], when I was an element leader, I would be responsible for the element, about six, seven pilots, and you'd take those [guys] up and give them that kind of training, the way you're expected to fly in formation, where they're supposed to be, and other things that are more [of] the kind of thing you can't teach here, and so, you tend to give them training, but, not nearly enough. They had to learn themselves. … The casualty rate was very high [for] the first three or four missions, then, they got enough experience to [survive], but, the other thing you found out is, there are some guys that are just not equipped to handle combat. … You didn't recognize them. Some of these guys were, like, majors. They'd been teaching all this time, but, never been in combat, and, all of a sudden, they come back, they'd start a mission, and they go on the radio, "My prop is gone out. I'm gonna have to return." Okay; they check it out. The engineering officer would say, "Nothing wrong with that prop. This is suspicious." The second time, "That's it, friend." You go back and do the worst thing, you fly what they called DC-3 and that's [to] carry people and supplies. That's why we hated to go in those transport planes, because every guy that couldn't fly a plane was stuck in those. We would rather be in combat.

SH: How often were you relieved or sent for R&R?

WW: It depended upon the necessity for us to fly missions, and, if it was a slow time, we'd get three or four days, and, as I said, we could take a plane to fly to Brussels or fly to Paris, and once I stayed one day too long, [laughter] and the Major says, "Where the hell were you, Wells? You're supposed to be here yesterday. What happened?" I went back to my field and they'd moved. [laughter] I land in the old field, they weren't there anymore. So, they were still moving some things, but, the planes were all gone. I finally found out, "They've gone [to] so-and-so," and I had to get my map and figure out, "Where the hell did they go?" Of course, I had every excuse. "My plane wasn't right." "Bullshit, don't give me that stuff," [laughter] but, again, I had enough time, a lot of seniority. If you'd proven yourself, they really needed you, as long as you didn't do something that was outrageous. The worst thing is not protecting your buddy in combat.

[TAPE PAUSED]

… Like a college professor. I mean, you're over here someplace. I'm just a country boy. Now, when you say color, … you have define your terms.

SH: I interviewed a man who said that he remembers World War II as gray. Then, he laughed and said, "But, I don't dream in Technicolor, either." Do you remember any of the smells or colors of the war? He talked about being cold all the time.

WW: Oh, yeah, but, that's personal. I damn near froze. The Germans lived very nicely, over in Germany, in their barracks, and we lived good when we got in Germany, because we lived in their barracks. [laughter] … See, we followed the troops, [so] that there was no barracks there, except tents, and, usually, four to a tent. I might say, on that subject, at one point, I was the only one left in the tent. One guy went nuts, tried to burn the tent. The other two lost in combat.

SH: Was he a pilot?

WW: Yeah. Guys lose it sometimes. He had been drinking a lot, and I'd been in the club, and I'd been drinking. … He was in bed, and he was making some noises about something, and I was half-loaded, so, I got in bed, and I realized [that] the guy was throwing gasoline around, and then, he was throwing matches. All of a sudden, I'm sober enough, I jump up, the fire started, but, we were able to get it out and carry him away, but, that happens in combat.

SH: How often did that happen?

WW: Not too often, just two or three times. Most of the guys were well-weeded out. If they're going to do that, they spot it a long while ago, but, this guy just completely went nuts. Here, he's trying to burn us all up, I'm sure he's perfectly all right now. It just got to him and he just lost it.

SH: Were any of your comrades ever shot up or wounded?

WW: Yeah.

SH: Were you ever wounded?

WW: Yeah, but, … it was only minor. I got hit in the wrist and I didn't even want to bother with it. … I kept right on flying. I just got the surgeon to tie it up. He said, "Should I report it?" "Hell no, don't." You get too busy doing your job. At that point, the Purple Heart didn't really mean too much. Now, my friend, Bill Scott, got hit in the eye, the Plexiglas of the plane, and … we brought him down by verbalizing, telling him what to do. He's alive today. It wasn't me. A pilot flew on his wings, said, "All right, ease back on your throttle a little more, let it go, put your stick down," and [they] actually landed the guy. The guy was bleeding so much, profusely he could not see. Now, he deserved a Purple Heart and the guy that brought him down deserved one, too.

SH: I know that you do not want to brag, but, could you please tell me about some of the awards that you received?

WW: Well, … I don't know. … By the way, I just got notice that there's one that doesn't show on this report and … the French government gave us one. In fact, I got a note from Bill Scott saying, "Talk to the French Embassy. They got some award that we deserve." I don't even know what the hell it is. You know, you're too busy worrying about when you're gonna get to Paris next, you know. Anyway, … I'll tell you what this says, "Battles: European Theater, Rhineland, Ardennes, Central Europe." I'm reading it, so you know I'm not [lying], "Decorations: European, African, Middle East Theater Campaign Ribbon, Air Medal with five clusters, Distinguished Flying Cross, Distinguished Unit Badge?" This info is in my discharge records.

SH: How did you get these awards?

WW: You know some of this is something that, … is based on the length of time that you've been in combat. Usually, all of us do a lot of crazy things, and, sometimes, like, some ground officer has to make these things up, and he'd say, "Bill, I've got to write this thing now. What the hell did you do?" I said, "What do you want?" I hate to tell you, but, that's the way it really is, and, in the case of Air Medals, technically, it was every ten combat missions [that] you got another leaf, and the Distinguished [Flying Cross] should be after fifty missions, and, usually, they'd try to do something you'd done. I didn't know what the hell I did, to tell you the truth. I think it was a plane I almost shot down, but, didn't get him, and I went into a spin and almost killed myself. Now, unless, I'm being a hero, that's being sort of dumb. [laughter] I don't even know. You know, you're too busy.

SH: Was there a write up with your Distinguished Flying Cross?

WW: Yeah, … I don't even know. The ground officers did all that. That was their job. We were too busy flying. I don't even know what the hell it was for. I mean, … there's a diary, by the way, in every squadron, day by day by day by day. If you read it, it'll give [you] great detail[s], but, discussing so much detail, it would drive you nuts, but, there is such a thing, and our squadron had it; most, I think, did. [It listed] this mission, this day, this pilot. … If somebody is shot down, I don't even know. I think they might put losses in there and stuff like that.

SH: Did you keep a journal or a log?

WW: Log all pilots keep of flying time, etc.

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

SH: This continues an interview with Mr. William Wells. Mr. Wells was just defending why he will not discuss his awards.

WW: Inaccurate. I don't know. You know, one mission, there were just some soldiers in the woods, so, you shoot the hell out of the woods. You don't know. Well, I'll tell you one, but, I don't know the award, [but, for] unusual missions, in which it was a lot of snow on the ground, and we were a little frustrated, looking for targets of opportunity. We'd drop a bomb sometimes,

and then, we were given freedom, individuals, to go out looking for anything that moved, like, rabbits, cows, horses. [laughter] So, I was having no luck, and this farmhouse (lawn?) was here, so, what the hell? I'll give it a short burst. So, I don't want to waste my ammunition. [You] never know when you'll get jumped by a German plane. So, I got right on top of it, just the trigger; the whole thing blew up in front of me. I went through it [laughter] and I couldn't do anything about it. The plane, when I got back, I checked the flaps, they worked, the wheels went down, and I went by the tower, and I said, "Look, as you can tell, I guess, I've been beat up a little bit. Does everything look all right?" and they said, "Yeah, but, you want to land wheels up." It's safer, sometimes, to land wheels up, believe it or not, and I said, "No, I think I'll try it. Everything seems to be all right," and I landed fine. So, I taxi up [to] where they keep the plane, and my crew chief was out there, and he said, "I heard, Lieutenant, you had a little trouble." I said, "Yeah, look under the plane." He looked under it, he says, "Forget it, take it over to the junkyard," … and, yet, that tough, old P-47 was still working fine, great plane. … I've got a picture of that, by the way, somewhere. It made some of the best explosions that, actually, … the Ninth Army was involved in. Mine says, "Lieutenant Wells," and it shows me about to go through this thing as it explode. [laughter] That was not an award, that was an accident, [laughter] … but, you did your job each day, and you don't know whether you're a hero or not. You just do your job and I don't think most guys with the DFC or any of them, … what the hell do you want me to tell you? [laughter]

SH: That is what they usually say. When did you complete your fifty missions? Do you remember the month and year?

WW: No. When was the war over?

SH: 1945.

WW: I know that, but, do you know what month?

SH: V-E Day was in May.

WW: Okay, I'm guessing. … Well, the most exciting thing, the last month, the action was very limited, so, we had some time. So, Bill Scott and I decided to go visit the Alps. So, anyway, we were down, I think it was the City of (Passau?), but, … it wasn't that far from Switzerland, not too far from the border of Austria and Czechoslovakia, right there on the Danube River. So, we decided to go visit the Alps. We didn't know, didn't think, that they didn't want us over in Switzerland. So, we're flying, "Da, da, da," Switzerland, "Pow, pow." They weren't trying to hit us. They're warning us, see. They were neutral and they didn't want anybody … over there, so, we got our asses back out of there [laughter]. You know, crazy experience. … I don't know who did it, some of the crew found a, do you know [what I mean] when I say ME 109, German fighter? Okay, it was in good shape. So, my crew chief was fooling with it, and he said, "Lieutenant, I can't read German. I don't know what some of these things are," but, he says, "If I can restore it, do you want to fly it around?" I said, "Yeah. Tell me all about it, Sam." He said, "I can't read German. … I got no operating manual." He said, "My real problem is the gas." They used low octane gas, you know. "This damned thing may overheat." … I said, "Well, [let it] run idle on the ground for a couple of hours." So, he latched on to me and said, "It

seems to be working all right. The flaps are working, the wheels go … down and up." I said, "Well, Jesus, all right." [laughter] So, it was a very tiny cockpit. If I got in, I couldn't get out, and I just flew around the field a couple of times. I couldn't figure out some of the controls. Mainly, [it was] like ours, but, there were differences, too. You know, I might hit "ejection seat." [laughter] Of course, it didn't have one, and so, I landed, but, I did fly a 109, but, I didn't fly it very far. I wasn't about to go down in a German plane, but, I did fly it; not many can say that. That's sort of a different experience, yeah, crazy. I'd been drinking again.

SH: Some veterans have mentioned how their equipment malfunctioned and that they had to jury rig it to continue. Did you ever have that experience?

WW: Yeah, well, I told about the one, the undercarriage [was] all pushed in. The other one was, I came [in] with holes a great many times, but, none of them were critical. Many missions, you came in [with holes]. I told you, my first mission, I think it was nine holes, but, none of them were "the end." Probably, when you talk about crazy things, now, this could happen not necessarily in combat, but, when you landed the plane, you would have an inspection sheet, and, on that sheet, you had to say everything is going good or some problem, and, at that time, we were jockeying around to see, crazy kids, [laughter] how fast we could hit the edge of the runway and get the plane around on the ground. Now, we're doing everything at once. The plane was going about four hundred miles an hour, we had to get the wheels down, the flaps down, and be able to land in this damned thing, and so, we're practicing it, you know. … "It took you thirty seconds. You're getting slow." So, anyway, I'm doing this. … The day before, my flaps didn't work right, and I … what they called "redlined" it. So, I assumed it was fixed. I came near the runway, the flaps didn't work, my plane almost went on my back. Now, … you see, that was not from combat, but, that just happens. That was the only crew member that I ever said, "I want him out. I'll never trust him again," and the engineering officer said, "You know, Lieutenant ..." I said, "Bullshit, out." So, I didn't care what he can do, I won't trust him again, because there's no room for error.

SH: How often did you receive your mail?

WW: This is touchy. [laughter] I almost killed my buddies. My mother would make a little package for me, now and then, a little food of some kind. I was away in Paris or something, the guys got hungry, and they found my package, ate the whole damned package. I almost killed them all, right there. Oh, I was furious. "You bastards, you ate my mother's food." "Oh, not us. We wouldn't do that, you know. Bill, what are you talking about?" … You never do that, really; I don't know why, they were drunk or something. We didn't touch another person's [stuff]. That was [taboo]. You see, you lived so close together that you had to have absolute respect for [the] other person's property and they didn't. That was something they shouldn't have done, but, you met a lot of crazies. I didn't like the commanding officer and he didn't like me at that time, and I flew his wing once and he didn't even know it, and, when he landed, he said, "Who the hell was always on my wing?" He said, "He did a hell of a good job." I said, "I was." "Oh." [laughter] Well, this guy comes to reunions, too. I give him the business, because, later, he stole my car. I liberated a German car. We fixed it up. I'm riding around in luxury. The CO is riding around in a jeep. Now, I knew that wasn't gonna last too long, so, when we went from one post to the other, I always arranged for a GI, somebody, to drive the car, 'cause I

had to fly the plane. That was all fine, except, I found out, from the engineering officer, the CO called him in, he said, "I don't want Wells to have that car. … I don't care how you do, but find out some way he can't have that car." So, he said, "Wells, I have to inspect the car." I said, "What the hell are you talking about? Inspect the plane, not the car." He said, "Because I got orders. [laughter] [I] don't want the pilots to get hurt." So, I knew I was dead. So, he inspected the car. He says, "Out of line." "So? Fix it." He says, "I can't." Well, you know what happened? We got to the next camp, who was riding the car? my CO. [laughter] He comes to reunions. Boy, do I remind him about that. … Oh, I never let him forget that. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Can you tell me a little more about the mail service?

WW: Mail service was pretty good. It was important that the boys heard from home. My mother was very good that way, and, somehow, you women have certain kinds of things that we men don't have, and she would cut something out of the paper. She said, "I've got a feeling you're in this," and she was right. [laughter] Now, how did she know that? I don't know, and there was a battle that I was involved in, and she did a good job of sending little things to me, like, whether I needed them or not. [laughter]

SH: Can you talk about "Dear John" letters?

WW: Yeah, they were bad. We didn't have too many of them. Most of the guys were single, only on occasion, thank God. Oh, I thank God I wasn't married; my conscience would be pricking, but, even the few, … you had all you could handle, you didn't need that, and why the girl couldn't just, you know, wait a few months and tell him personally or something, when he got out of combat, [I don't know], but, to handle the pressure of combat and get some girl who said, "I'm tired of waiting. I got nothing to do. I'm lonely. I found some guy who gave me a good time," did cut. … No, we didn't have too much of that.

SH: Did that affect their ability to fly missions?

WW: No. Remember, … each guy was the captain of his own ship. These guys were pretty senior pilots and they wouldn't be there if they could not handle most of their emotions.

SH: After your first few missions, did you begin to count how many missions you had completed and how many you had left?

WW: Not too much. We were just [taking it] one day at a time. "I got through that one." You become kind of a fatalist.

SH: What happened as you began to approach fifty?

WW: Then, you don't slide. Well, in my case, it was the end of the war, and they weren't going to give me anything anyway, but, what we did, generally, is only fly forty-nine or twenty-four. They never flew the last mission, because it seemed … that's when you got in trouble. So, the

CO would cut it off at forty-nine and cut it off at twenty-four, whatever it was at that time, it varied, and say, "No, that's enough, no more."

SH: I just assumed that there must have been a great deal of pressure on you.

WW: You couldn't spot it, because we covered it very well. You don't display too much emotion. You just have a good time, drink a lot, all that kind of stuff.

SH: Where did you fly your forty-ninth mission?

WW: Oh, God, I don't know. … Fifty missions, you want me to remember each one, I can't.

SH: Do you remember your last mission?

WW: No, because I didn't know it was my last. You don't know what's the last one, because the war's still going on, and you don't know, at that point, whether they're gonna continue to need you or whether the war's so close to the end that they may not. So, I didn't pay much attention to it.

SH: When did you get the order to stop flying?

WW: … When they signed the peace declaration.

SH: You were flying missions right up until the surrender.

WW: Yeah. I guess, the last thirty days, it wasn't too active. I don't even remember, to tell you the truth, and then, I agreed [laughter] to train a new outfit. So, we stayed right in Germany, at another place, and trained the new outfit. That was a lot of fun.

SH: In Germany?

WW: In Germany, yes, and that was the best place to train. We didn't worry about the cows. … Good if they didn't give milk, as far as we're concerned. [laughter] Any bridge we could fly under, we'd fly under. The hell with going over it. [laughter] Over here, they get upset with that, but, that was really fun, and the pressure was off of us a little bit, because our CO, I guess women wouldn't understand this, but, the CO would say, "Look, I want the toughest, best flying outfit there is, and, if I have to sign a little paper if he "goes in," I don't give a damn. It's better, here, we find out than over there." … I guess women would not like that, but, it was because, if you are weak, you may destroy somebody else, so, there has to be a certain amount of toughness, but, it was fun training these guys, and they were pretty good. They learned pretty fast. We'd take them, wander around the mountains and do all that kind of stuff, and I made a few of them a little nervous, but, that's all right. They made me nervous at times, too.

SH: Did you have any idea, since you worked so closely with the front lines, how the war was progressing?

WW: No, they didn't tell us too much.

SH: You could not tell.

WW: … You'd be surprised how little we knew. *The Stars and Stripes,* or whatever it was called, [would] tell us a little bit, but, all our world was just there, and the outside world, … we didn't know too much about [what was] going on. … [They] didn't tell us much. For instance, a good example, if I say, ME, I think it's 262s, does that mean anything to you? This is a German jet. … We didn't know [they] existed, and I was flying over the Meuse River, and, all of a sudden, we're patrolling, to see [if] any Germans were looking for a fight, "Whoosh." "What the hell was that?" [laughter] like Superman. The airways were screaming. We didn't know such a thing existed. … You know, you'd think they'd say, "Hey, the Germans [have] got a vet plane." Maybe they didn't know … [they were] gonna fly it. I tell you, when we landed, there was hell to pay. "What the hell? We're gonna lose the goddamned war," you know. Well, fortunately, they weren't that far along. … Another year, it would have been real rough, but, that thing went by us a hundred miles an hour, like we're standing still. They blew up in the air. … They only [could] stay in the air, like, thirty minutes, forty-five minutes. They didn't know how to use weapons, because … the air speed was such that they had different problems. So, it was mostly a psychological thing at that point, but, a year or so, it could have been a real problem. Now, we know the English also had some jets, but, we didn't know anything about it. They were experimenting, also. That was a scary time.

SH: Did you ever fly anti-submarine missions?

WW: No.

SH: You always flew over land.

WW: No, we only flew [over the ocean], only when we were in training. They said, "One thing, you guys, never fly over a ship. … They don't care who you are. You fly over, you're a potential enemy, they're gonna shoot you down." [laughter] … You can understand their feeling and they don't know for sure. Germans would liberate some of our own planes and would fly them, like, you see, so, they could never tell and they wouldn't [hold back] (Navy). … Even though I didn't fly over the water to speak of, we were told, "Hey, never, never fly over a Navy ship."

SH: How long after the surrender was it before you returned to the United States?

WW: I was lucky. Immediately after May, I guess, probably, June, when was the war over, over in Japan? Do you know the date?

SH: September 2nd.

WW: So, it was only three months later. All right, we trained, I guess, about a month-and-a-half, and then, we took [a train]. Our trains weren't good, but, they were worse. You could get out and walk as fast as the trains used to go, [laughter] and so, we took a train down to

Marseilles, because we were going over to the Asian Theater, and the ship was there, but, they just turned the ship around, so, I got home early. I was very lucky [that] it worked out.

SH: You were literally going to be shipped over to Japan.

WW: Japan, yeah, that was the original [plan]. So, they just turned it around. We were down there, ready to board it. They just sent us back to the States, so, I got back quite early. I don't remember the date. … A highlight of my overseas adventures was an opportunity to meet and spend several mon5ths with the famous Josh Logan, Director of South Pacific, Mr. Roberts. What a story. Close to (?), Stewart and Henry Fonda (classmates at Princeton). What a guy to see Paris with. Every French girl in Paris tried to get to him, I observed.

SH: Did you come back to New York Harbor?

WW: Yeah, we came back to New York Harbor, and then, … they shipped us, I forget, [to] some field up the Hudson River. They couldn't handle us there. Then, they shipped us down to Dix, Fort Dix, and then, when they processed us, and they came [to] the thing about [the] Reserve, and I passed over it. … Of course, a ground officer yelled, "Hey, Lieutenant, you didn't sign the reserve paper." I said, "I know." [laughter] He said, "Oh, everybody signs it. … You know, that's my orders. … You don't get out." I said, "I don't care. What the hell? Put me in the stockade. I'm not going to sign that damned thing. … You want … the enemy to get shot at, I'll go over there, but, I'm a peacetime guy," and he said, "Well, I don't know what the hell [will happen]. You may be here three or four months. I can't get you out." I said, "I don't give a damn." I said, "When we're in trouble, I'll be the first in line, but, I don't like to play soldier." So, of course, I got out like everybody else and it's probably just as well, because I'd have been called back, as you know, for Vietnam or whatever, Korea, and that would have been all right, too, but, … at that point, I had enough, and I never did like peacetime kind of stuff. I love to go up and do my thing, but, to play soldier, is not my "thing."

SH: Did you continue to fly?

WW: I flew occasionally. Flying is … a very expensive kind of activity, and I got married, and I find out [that] all that money she was supposed to have, she didn't have, [laughter] and then, she got pregnant on me. So, I used to fly when I got a chance. I still do. … One of my buddies has a plane down here. It was a nice, little plane, but, he won't let me take the controls. He's worried. I said, "Look, I'm just curious. I want to see if the wings will come off." "Stay away from my controls, Wells," [laughter] and we have a little fun. He's got some new navigation equipment. It's just unbelievable. He said, "You want to go to California?" "Yeah, let's go to Oakland." He said, "All right," push a couple of buttons, "I'm taking a heading of 302 degrees. It'll take us nine hours." We didn't have any of that stuff. It was very basic when we flew. … Flying is entirely different. You need to be an engineer now to fly. They're not pilots anymore, they, "Read a manual." …

SH: How did World War II make you the man that I am interviewing today?

WW: You mean me?

SH: Yes.

WW: I think that it left some scars, and it was with the other tragedies (child murder) that we had with our own family. But, I think, also, it gave me a perspective, "There's some things [that are] important in this world and some things that are not," and one of my perspectives [is], I don't like to play war, so, … I had no interest in doing that, but, I loved to fly. I didn't go commercial because, at that time, there was a feeling among us that that was like driving a truck. Well, they weren't paying big money then, and they didn't need many pilots, so, I ducked, and, now, if I had known I'd make that kind of money, I think I made a mistake, but, it's rather dull flying. The only time you need a pilot is landing and take off, or bad weather, or mechanical problems. Then, he earns his money. The rest of the time, they really don't have a hell of a lot to do. You got an engineering officer, and a co-pilot, and three hostesses.

SH: Did you use the GI Bill at all? Did you go back to school?

WW: You know, I never took a thing from [the] GI [Bill]. Oh, there's one thing; I got a mortgage, like a four-and-a-quarter mortgage or something like that, but, outside that, I haven't taken a damn thing. There's supposed to be some drug thing floating around that I can't get my hands on. Esther claims I need a hearing aid and I might prove that this is service connected, because of open cockpits and my ears. It was a privilege to serve my country. It does not owe me a thing.

SH: How did you meet Mrs. Wells?

WW: Is she listening? [laughter] A girl I met at NJC, and we were just friends, said, "Hey, I got a gal [that] I need a date for." "I'd rather pick my own," I responded. She said, "Goddamn it, come on up." She lived in Chester. … At that time, where was I living? I don't remember, I guess with my folks, I'm not sure. I went through Princeton, and I passed a good looking bar. I stopped in. There's some Princeton guys there. You know, one thing after the [other], I found the girls house, [you] enter on the second floor. I stumbled up the steps, because I was loaded, and then, I hate square dancing, detest it. Where did they take us to? square dancing. I said, "I don't know how to do this kind of dancing." So, she takes off with somebody else, I'm madder than hell, she's mad. So, that was the beginning of the whole thing, until she got her older brothers in the act. Then, I got a little scared about the whole thing.

SH: Did your wife go to NJC?

WW: No, no. …

SH: Please, tell me about your family.

WW: You mean the kids? My daughter graduated from, it's still NJC to me, and, I don't know, I guess twenty-five years ago, thirty years ago. … She's doing wonderfully well now. [She has three daughters and a son, Billy, who is] … going to Rutgers now. … He's starting his junior

year there this year. He's a nice kid. … He's good looking, got a girlfriend, but he's too young to have a steady girl. I'll have to have a little talk with him about that.

SH: You also have a son.

WW: And I have Scott, my son, who … [is] an expert in wireless communication. That's his thing. He started with wireless phones, and so, he went to three different companies, you know. Now, he's with AT&T. Of course, they had an awful turmoil, the latest is that they're separating the wireless operation. … He has a lovely home up in Orlando, beautiful, right on the lake, with a beach. Ever heard of a sandy lake? And it's just a gorgeous home.

SH: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

WW: No, and, please, go through this thing and you're free to change anything, because you're a writer and I know you know how to do it. …

SH: What did you do after the war?

WW: Okay. I tried to get something related to my school studies. Did you ever hear of Safeway Stores? Okay, I went to work for Safeway Stores, and I started as a buyer of fruit and produce down here in Florida. I fell in love with Florida, way back then, when I was training down here, and I said, "I want to see if I can get work in Florida." Well, I found out, very quickly, that the president of the bank was only making a hundred dollars a week, [laughter] but, I did get a job with Safeway paying excellent, fifty dollars a week. I was making over a hundred dollars in the service. So, [I started] at fifty dollars a week, but, you took what you [could] get. So, I started as a buyer, which was very interesting. I got to see a lot of Florida. I just fell in love with it, way back then, but, I found out, there's no way I could make much of an income. Most women don't like to live out of suitcases. So, I soon found out that I was going to have to change my style. Female tears, "I want to go home to my mother," you know, all the stuff you women do. So, anyway, I went up to the main office, at that time, it was in Jersey City, and worked there, personnel, public relations, advertising. I went in different staff positions, but that division was in trouble, and I said, "Hey, you know, big companies don't mind lopping off a division." I said, "Maybe I should make [a change]." So, I made a move and I took over a trade association involved in the elevator industry. We'd negotiate a contract, national contract, and all that stuff. I stayed with them for a while, and there was no way to go, so, then, I went with the NAED, which was the National Association of Electric Distributors. NAED represented the wholesale operation of the electrical industry, represented over eight hundred companies and I stayed with them for about twenty years, and we did a lot of consulting, management consulting work, for about eight hundred corporations, I got a new challenge everyday and ended up vice-president. … We had, the last year, 225 meetings, anywheres from 4000 attendings down to maybe a half a dozen, in all fifty states, and we published a magazine, and we did a lot of, as I said, … consulting kind of stuff, … went to Washington. We tried to educate the legislature. We never used that word, "lobbying," ourselves, "educate" them. [laughter] So, that's where I ended up in my career. So, … trade association executive is probably the proper term, but, I did move around a lot. I had some wonderful experiences. Just one of them, the Rockefeller family and Merrill Lynch always used an outside consulting firm called (Braun and?) Company, and

they had Safeway Stores, along with other major companies, and, when I was handling public relations for the division, I got to study these guys. They're mostly CIA, FBI, on and on, and they had all kinds of "ins" in the government. Oh, were they ruthless, those guys. … I'd learned from them. I reitred in 1985. I've served as an officer, board, of Rotary Red Cross, Chamber of Commerce, private clubs, Boys Clubs (of Church), and this occupies my time now, trying to do srevice in the community.

SH: This concludes an interview with Mr. William Wells. Thank you so much for hosting the next interview.

WW: Can I make a request please? Edit this thing carefully.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 10/18/01
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