

Oral History August 13, 2013
2nd Lt. Mark Brooks Calnon
WWII Pilot and Prisoner of War

Interviewer: Denise Bennett

0:00-1:00

Q: Where were you born and when?

MC: I was born in the very house were in right now in 1918.

Q: And um where did you go to school?

MC: Right here in Meridian right next door.

Q: And how about where did you go to college?

MC: At the University of Idaho in Moscow.

Q: And what did you study at the University of Idaho.

MC: Agriculture that's the only thing I knew in those days.

Q: And what was your experience like at the U of I?

MC: It was good and it was pleasant and I enjoyed it. I had to work my way through but then that paid off in the long run.

1:00-2:39

Q: And then what did you do after you graduated?

MC: Well it wasn't long before I went into the Army. The draft was on, and I was about to get, my number was about to come up so I volunteered. I knew I didn't want to pack a rifle and I thought well if I volunteered I might have a little choice of what I did.

Q: And so what was the choice?

MC: The Air Corps, Army Air Corps. That's, now it's all changed, it's a Army, it's a Air Force now. At that time the Air Corps was a part of the Army, it wasn't a separate unit at all.

Q: And then where did you do your training once you volunteered?

MC: Well, that's, first I went to Jefferson Barracks which is just an assembly point and then eventually, I was only there a matter of practically days and then went to San Antonio for assignment. And at that time we, I didn't know what...

2:39-5:53

MC: And there we got assignment and I was, I was assigned as a, to go to officer's training for weather observer, and at that time they didn't have any openings so I went to in training or on job training and that was at Albuquerque New Mexico and while I was there we still studied weather observing and it was real pleasant the only problem was, at that time, a buck private paid twenty dollars a month and I couldn't live like I wanted so I saw the sign be an aviation cadet, seventy-five dollars a month while you're in training and a hundred and seventy-five when you, when you were commissioned. And I figured I don't know what I have to do but that's for me, that seventy-five dollars looked good. So I didn't know, as I say I didn't know what I was going to do, but I just, I wanted, I knew you had to fly some way and for some reason I was interested in aerial photography. And so I went to take a, I applied for that and then went to, had to take a physical and so when I did that the doctor said why did you apply for aerial photography and well I knew one eye wasn't as good as the other and so I explained that to him and he said your eyes are twenty-twenty why don't you apply for pilot training. And I said well fine, sign me up and that's what he did and that's when I got into flying.

Q: And what kind of plane were you trained on then?

MC: It's called a B... um, shut it off again.

Q: OK

MC: (chuckles)

5:53-8:17

MC: OK, now I know.

Q: OK.

MC: OK. I trained in what's called a B T Twenty-one and that was at Tulsa, Oklahoma. And that's where I started my flying career.

Q: And what was that like? The first time you flew a plane.

MC: It was real hard training because in fact sixty percent of the cadets flunked out and when you were always harassed. The instructors harassed you to see if you to see if you could take the beating and I always remember that when the instructors would threaten to wash you out the next day and a lot of the fellas they'd go back to their barracks in tears because they wanted to fly all their life. Well, I didn't care whether I flew or not so when I went back to the barracks I packed my bags ready to leave. And that day never come so I did, and once you get through primary training you're pretty well set, if you, unless you really flub up real bad.

Q: And so when did the war start? Were you in training when the war started?

MC: Oh yeah. I was still at Albuquerque when it started.

Q: And then when did you go to Europe?

MC: In, well shut that off again... (chuckles)

Q: OK. OK.

8:17-13:11

MC: Let me, see I can't remember the dates.

Q: That's OK.

MC: Let me think. Oh OK, we went over seas in August of about 43.

Q: And where did you go?

MC: We flew across the Atlantic Ocean and landed in Prestwick, Scotland. And from there you went down to the, they trucked you down to England, and, and you got your, permanent, assignment to a flying group there.

Q: And when did you take your first mission?

MC: That I can't remember.

Q: Well OK do you remember kinda what the feeling was like on your first mission?

MC: The, um, you always remember that at that time, well course I was a pilot then of course, and your first mission was as a co-pilot with an experienced crew and I remember flying across the channel and the first thing you, the first thing you know we encountered German fighters. And the first thought was well they're trying to kill me. And, and the odd part is that, at the group that I was assigned to, one of my former classmates, pilot training was there and I remember I said, ask if, if I could go as his co-pilot on the first mission and, and course he didn't have any say in it so it didn't materialize but on that first mission the German fighters came right through the formation and took him out so if I'd a been co-pilot with him why that would've been my first and last mission.

Q: Wow, so then you, fly as the co-pilot just one time?

MC: One time.

Q: OK.

MC: After that you're considered experienced.

Q: After one time?

MC: One time.

Q: Wow, so when did you do your first mission as pilot or what was that like?

MC: Well, it was a memorable experience as I say, you, the first thing you know, is there, this is not friendly territory.

Q: And what part of Germany were you flying in?

MC: Say that again.

Q: What part of Germany was it that you were flying towards? Like where was the target?

MC: The first mission it was a submarine pens at Nance.

Q: And so I guess, what's it like to fly a B-17 that's full of bombs? How's that to fly?

MC: It's remarkably easy, it's a real, real pleasant job, they respond real, real good. There used to always be conflict between the B-17 and the B-24s on which was the better plane and fellas that flew both planes said that, a B-17, you flew a B-17 but you drove a B-24. One of the other interesting things of how they compared it, the B-17 said the B-24 wasn't crate that they shipped the B-17s over in.

Q: Did you fly both?

MC: Oh no.

13:12-20:43

Q: No. So, tell me about how you got shot down.

MC: Well, we were on our way back from the mission we'd been to Anklam bombed an aircraft factory and we were on our way home, we were, we were over Denmark and ah, attacked by German fighters, and, and, we didn't have any fighter escort or anything like that, so you were strictly on your own and, and we were the top position in the, in the squadron, and that's the one the German fighters head for first.

Q: And so they shot out an engine or what happened?

MC: No they, we were hit in the tail and it jammed the right rudder and that put us in a skid and of course you lose air speed when that happens and once they get ya outta, outta the formation why, that's, that's all she wrote.

Q: And so how did you react when that happened as the pilot?

MC: Well, ordered everyone else to bail out and then, and then had to get out myself.

Q: Did you train for that, to jump out?

MC: Oh no. That's the first, and the first, the first, it's always the first time. You don't need training for that. You're assigned, you know where you're supposed to go out and so you don't need to train.

Q: OK, so you had to jump out of the plane and then what happened?

MC: Well, something interesting before we bailed out, that the engineer who is up in the cockpit with you, when, when, when you bail out he's supposed to pull a release to open the bomb bay doors, and the pilot, co-pilot and engineer go out there. Well when it came time to bail out I turned around to go out the bomb bays and the doors were closed and I couldn't imagine why the engineer hadn't opened them. I come to find later on that he did try, but uh doors were shot up so bad that they wouldn't open so he started across the cat walk to bail out in the waist and when he got on the cat walk we got hit again and it knocked him off of the cat walk and he fell down on the bomb bay doors, they opened up let him out and then closed back up. And he was wounded but that's the way he got out of the plane.

Q: So how'd you get out if they closed back up?

MC: Well I had to go down through the hatch down to the nose and bail out from the nose.

Q: And how long were you falling for do you think?

MC: It's hard to say, but I know, the, the thing is, what, course you, you kinda debate when to pull the rip cord and I fell as long as I dared and, and, when I, when I thought I could hear the plane, and so I kinda kicked myself along back and looked up and the plane's just right above me and it was falling just like a leaf and I waited long as I dare to pull the rip cord and when I did, the opening of the chute the plane caught up with me the wing went by me, oh about ten feet or so, and I saw it stop turning, knowing it had hit the ground and then I hit the ground. So that's how close I was to the ground when the chute opened.

Q: Did it hurt when you hit the ground?

MC: Yeah, kinda. I must've landed kinda face first because I was asked later on if I was wounded and I said no and they said well your face is bloody so I must've hit the ground because I wasn't hit in the plane.

Q: Were you alone then when you landed, were any of your crew around?

MC: They were around I didn't know where they were but there. When I hit the ground of course you're supposed to try and escape and so I got out of my chute and started to run to where there's a row of hedges, when I got up there here was a German soldier waiting for me so that's the way I was captured.

Q: And then where did they take you?

MC: They took me to apparently a little village I don't know how big it was but, uh, locked us up in a kinda of a jail I guess it was, and there were other prisoners there too. In fact my pilot, my co-pilot and bombardier were there and one of the crew-members that was, that got shot up in the plane was there, plus one or two other planes so there were, there were several planes shot down there and crews wound up there.

Q: Did they keep you there long?

MC: No, we were there, I don't know maybe a day or two, and then they put us on a train and took us down to Frankfurt, where, which was an assembly place for prisoners of war.

20:44-25:14

Q: Well, I guess then, how long, how long were you a prisoner of war?

MC: A year eighteen months actually.

Q: How did they treat you?

MC: Physically fine, I never had a German lay a hand on me. But starving me, yes, eventually.

Q: And what did they want from you?

MC: At Frankfurt?

Q: Yeah.

MC: Well that's another kind of interesting thing they, they interrogate you and they ask you all the pertinent questions about, and the thing is they take you out and, or they took me out and I sat at a table across from a German officer and he started asking me questions and you're ordered only to give your name, rank and serial number. And I did that and he wanted to know where I was born and a few things like that, and they were insignificant. And when he got down to pertinent questions about where we were in the formation and how vulnerable were you, I said well this is, that's as far as I can go and he says no you have to fill this out for the Red Cross. Well I knew the Red Cross didn't interrogate anyone so I said well that's as far as I can go and, and he stood up and pulled out his pistol and pointed it at me and he said now I can shoot you anytime I want because no one knows where you are or what's happened to you. Well I didn't think he would, but had I seen him shoot someone I don't know what I'd have done.

Q: Yeah, what was your first thought when you knew you were a prisoner of war?

MC: First, my first thought was that my Mother's gonna get that dreaded telegram saying that I had, missing in action and not knowing that I was still alive and still had a chance.

Q: And were you able, after sometime to communicate with your family?

MC: In the prison camp, you, they gave you a form, they gave you four postcards and then one little letter form that every month, and you could write to your family.

Q: What'd you tell 'em when you wrote to them?

MC: There's nothing you could tell them, all you could tell 'em is that the weather's fine, you're doing all right. Because they, you knew your letter is going to be censored. And one thing I can't understand is there's one, my mother kept these letters of course, and there was one, one letter that, that every word was blocked out and for the life of me I couldn't figure out what it could've been because I knew better than to say anything that was detrimental.

Q: Huh. They just scratched it out?

MC: They block, they just block it out in black.

Q: Wow. So how did your family react when you came home?

MC: Of course they were glad to see me.

Q: What was the first thing you did when you got home?

MC: Have a good, good meal (laughs).

25:15-27:41

Q: So what did they feed you at the prison camp, when they fed you?

MC: We, the first six months wasn't bad. We got Red Cross parcels and they had twelve pounds in them and every man got one a week. And they had things, had Spam in them, corned beef, a package of cigarettes and sometimes some kind of dried fruit or something and it, it was adequate. Now the Germans they gave us a little food, for one that I remember is, they had a barley soup and if you didn't mind seeing the larvae in it, why, it was edible. And once in a while we got sauerkraut, which was good in those days.

Q: And so then what happened after that six months?

MC: Well, we were transferred down to Moosburg, that's when we went on this man march in the blizzard and everything and when we got down to Moosburg, they did, we got practically no food, however that was not entirely the German's fault 'cause the thing is they couldn't get these Red Cross parcels into us because all their railroads and highways were all shot up and the trains were shot up and the trucks were shot up, so to be fair they couldn't get it into us so that was, that was pretty slim pickens then.

27:42-30:46

Q: So, why did they move you? Why did they make you take that march?

MC: Because the Russians were getting close to us.

Q. OK.

MC: We could hear the guns.

Q: So how long did you have to march for?

MC: I don't remember right now how many days but we were out in this, out in this blizzard for about three days. Then they put us on, on the boxcars on the railroad and we were on that for, for two or three days.

Q: And did you freeze? How cold was it?

MC: It was below zero and a blizzard.

Q: So tell me about the best cup of coffee you ever had?

MC: Oh, well on the march they, we noticed, we looked ahead and noticed a group of prisoners. And there were a couple of German women, were pouring out hot water. We had in our backpack, probably a Nescafe and they, so you held out your cup and the women would give you hot water and I'd say that was the best cup of coffee I ever had. It was kind of odd one of the women said something about my son is a prisoner of war and they've taken him over to the United States and she said I hope they're not treating him like we're treating you.

Q: Wow. So what was the vow you made when you warmed up?

MC: Oh, I swore that if I ever get warm again I'll never complain about the cold weather and I haven't.

Q: So, was the name of the camp Moosburg when you moved?

MC: Yeah, Moosburg, yeah.

Q: And how many prisoners were there?

MC: A hundred thousand. Things were getting cramped ya know, because the Germany was getting closed in on, so they didn't have any place to, they ran out of prison camps, so Moosburg was one of the ones about the last assembly place.

Q: And so what was life like there, what did you do?

MC: Nothing, absolutely nothing all you could do was sit and wait.

30:47-35:18

Q: And could you hear the fighting and stuff or see anything?

MC: Yeah we, this was in April and the weather was quite nice so we kinda got in the habit of, just sitting out alongside of the barracks and eventually we could start hearing, hearing guns again. We knew who it was of course and the question was what are they gonna do with us. Because they had trouble moving ten thousand out of Stalag Luft III so how they gonna move a hundred thousand? So we kinda got in the habit of sitting out, sitting out of the building and listening to the guns. And on April 30 why we could hear the, that night, we could hear traffic out on the road and we didn't know, we knew it was tanks and trucks but we didn't know whether they were moving to defend the camp or retreating. Well the next morning we went out to sit in the sun and there wasn't a sound and about nine o'clock why a P-51 flew around the camp and did the strafing on the side and then, then at 9 o'clock sharp all hell broke loose. The Germans, the Americans are shooting over the camp into Moosburg, and the Germans in Moosburg were shooting over the camp back at the Americans and for three hours we sat there in no mans land and at noon we looked down into Moosburg and we could see the American flag go up so we knew the war was over for us anyway and about that same time a German tank came into the camp to see if there were any Germans in there and so then we knew that, that we were at least free at last.

Q: And so did they come and liberate you right then?

MC: Well, we stayed, we stayed in the camp there for oh another two or three days and then they flew us out, they flew us out to France.

Q: And you got a bed, did you get a bed in France? Did you get a bed, a place to sleep?

MC: Oh yeah. They took us, they flew us out to Le Havre and there was a big camp there where, where they brought the troops in and, before they went to the front, so now they just worked it backwards. When you went home why you went there so you had food and everything. The only thing is they wouldn't let you eat all you wanted those that did got sick so.

Q: Yeah I bet that would take some getting used to.

MC: Yeah. And the, when I got shot down I had a thirty-two inch waist and I had a twenty-eight inch waist when I got out. I didn't get a chance to weigh myself but I did loose a little weight.

Q: Did anybody get sick or hurt in the camp? At Stalag Luft III.

35:19-42:03

MC: Stalag Luft III, that's where this big great escape was that you read about.

Q: OK tell me about that.

MC: Well, it wasn't, Stalag Luft III was divided into, into five compounds, North, South, East, West and Central. I was in Central. The great escape happened in one of the other, in the English compound and they were masters at escape. They started digging and of course there was always tunneling going on so on this one, they decided to dig three tunnels in case they were discovered which they always invariably were. They were gonna dig, ah, no stop again.

Q: OK

MC: They decided to dig three tunnels, Tom, Dick and Harry. And they, they had a real elaborate, they had a ventilation system down in, I forget which tunnel, completed. But they had lights down there. The way the got lights was one time they sent some forced labor fellas in to do some wiring and they went to do something and there's this wire there and the prisoners stole it, so that's the way they got their lights down there. They did, they did complete the one tunnel and they were gonna plan the escape. Well the night they were gonna escape there was an air raid and they doubled their guards out there. Well they got seventy-six prisoners out before the tunnel was discovered, and all of them but three were recaptured in a matter, in a matter of days. And I think it was fifty-six of them they shot and then they passed a bullet around in the camp and said tunneling is no longer a game. So they were giving us warning that we better be careful, however they did keep tunneling but the problem with a lot of times in the tunneling, what do you do with the dirt? Well there were several ways that they did it sometimes they put it up above the rooms until the boards started breaking. One of the best ways that lasted quite a while, for some reason the YMCAs sent us garden seeds, and so the guys had decided that they'd have a garden so they, they, now the Germans would let you have a shovel if you guaranteed not to use them to do any tunneling. So what they did was spade up the dirt outside the barracks. Well this worked fine until the dirt got about six or eight inches high and of course then they knew there was tunneling and they'd soon find them. And another way of getting rid of the dirt was, there was a path around the houses, around all the building and they, they'd take a shirt and fill up the legs with dirt and uh, with a string at the bottom, so you could pull the string and the dirt would dribble out and on this path around, the fellas would walk around and

dribble out the dirt and the other fellas would come by of course walk it into the ground so there were ways of doing it but the tunnels were almost always invariably found.

Q: That's pretty clever though.

MC: Oh yeah.

Q: That's pretty clever, so did you ever think about tunneling or trying to escape?

MC: Absolutely not. What would you or how would you, how would you get out or how would you live if you were in the middle of a foreign country? You didn't know the language and you could get shot awfully easy.

Q: So when you were there did you ever think about how long is this gonna last?

42:04-44:38

MC: Oh yeah. One interesting, there was a, the International Red Cross, where, the camps could be inspected by a neutral country and um, one observer wrote in an article later on that in one of the barracks on one wall there was a drawing of the, of a sun, a sun rising, under it was a caption, "How much longer?" Across the room was the same painting with a caption under it, "One less day." So you were always thinking about it.

Q: So how many days, you said a year and a half?

MC: Yeah a year and a half.

Q: And what's the, was there someone you met that had been there longer? What's the longest that you knew of?

MC: One time we were, uh, standing by the fence, and there were some English soldiers came by, they were on a work detail, and they'd, everyone'd banter back and forth and uh, um one of them asked how long have you been here? And real smugly we told him and I don't know how long it'd been then, but we told him how long and we said how long you been here? He said we were picked up at Dunkirk, which was the, when the British got run out of France. So I think that was four years or something.

Q: That's a long time.

MC: Long time.

44:39-48:36

Q: Yeah, yeah. So what were the conditions like at the Stalag Luft III compared to Moosburg?

MC: Oh, no comparison. Stalag Luft III wasn't bad at all. In fact, there was lots of, there was activities at Stalag Luft III. We could get, they'd send in musical instruments, paperback books, so there was, there was things to do. But not at Moosburg, there was nothing there.

Q: And you were at Moosburg a year?

MC: That's where we wound up.

Q: Yeah.

MC: That's where we were liberated from.

Q: So were you aware of the concentration camps when you guys were in the prison camps?

MC: Oh absolutely.

Q: Well what do you think of that?

MC: There, at one time, they brought in some new prisoners and they had been, they had been at Buchenwald. And the thing about being a prisoner, the Germans were real (dog barking in background), um, jealous of, who handles, handled the prisoners. The Luftwaffe took care of the flying prisoners and the Wehrmacht the ground prisoners. Well the Luftwaffe heard about there being some of the flyers, American flyers in Buchenwald and they went and got them out and brought them up to Stalag Luft III and that's when we heard about these stories.

Q: What did they tell you?

MC: About the gas chambers.

Q: Was that something that concerned you that might happen to you?

MC: Absolutely. If they can do it to one they can do it to another.

Q: So did you ever go back after the war? And visit the camps or Germany?

MC: No.

Q: Never any desire to go back there?

MC: No. At one time I thought it'd be kind of nice to find Stalag Luft III, where it was. It's kind of odd my, uh, my navigator ah, went, um one of his kids, uh, worked in Germany, and so he went back to visit him and so he thought he'd see if he could find Moosburg. And so they went to, went to Moosburg and inquired around and no one seemed to remember where the prison camp was. And uh, eventually they found someone that knew where it was and they took them out there and all that was left, there were three buildings, still standing there and my navigator's wife said, the navigator's name was Ted, she said when Ted saw those buildings he turned as white as a sheet. So that was the effect it had on him.

48:37-55:09

Q: Did you ever have nightmares or anything when you came back? Was it hard to kind of re-adjust to not being a prisoner?

MC: I used to have, they weren't particularly nightmares but there was one I had where you were captured again and one time I said, "Oh no, not again." (laughs)

Q: Oh no, well that's good to wake up from that.

MC: (laughs) Yeah.

Q: At least you could wake up from that. Wow, so what did they call you?

MC: Kriegies, which is German for, of Krisigram, oh, some long German word but it shortened down to Kriegie.

Q: And what does Kriegie mean?

MC: Prisoner of, well the whole, Kriegsgefangene, which means prisoner of war. And we called them goons. Ah, the, they had uh, Germans that patrolled in the camp, and uh, and you know your idea of what a goon is, isn't flattering. We told the Germans it stood for German Officer or Non-com, and which they apparently believed.

Q: That's funny I wonder if they ever found out different.

MC: (laughs) Probably later on.

Q: Did they call you Kriegies or did you kind of just call yourselves that?

MC: Oh we called ourselves that.

Q: It's kind of, I bet you have to have a bit of a sense of humor when things are that bleak.

MC: Oh yeah, the, one uh, thing that happened. There are things that happened that, one was uh, one time the, our German, went into our confidant's office or barracks and said there was something going on over at one of the barracks that was causing a problem or something. And so we went over there and what had happened was, now every day you, every, once a day you got a pitcher of hot water, in these little combines that are in the barracks, and when the commandant got over there he found out that, the barracks are built about three feet off the ground, and what had happened, these goons would sometimes crawl under there to see if there's any tunneling, well there was the, a goon or two under there and the prisoners were pouring hot water, hot water through the floor on them. And they couldn't get out because the sides had the pitchers of water, so the, Col. Spivey said he had to put a stop to it. But there were things like that that happened.

Q: That's pretty funny because they can't get out.

MC: Yeah. (laughs)

Q: They're trapped under there getting hot water poured on them. You didn't worry about them retaliating?

MC: They generally, no.

Q: No

MC: Not anything like that. In fact they were friendly to us the only thing is you are not supposed to talk to them and the reason for that was that there are certain prisoners or certain guards that can be bribed and so they had a committee that if you, that, if you wanted something why see as, the committee knew what guards could be bribed, and if you wanted something why let them know and they'd get it for you because you could always find something the Germans wanted, of course cigarettes, or something like that. And um, now I got a pocket knife and what I got the knife for was we used them to take the tin cans and make cooking pans out of them and you could, uh with a pocket knife you could sear everything and bend it you know, but other, but that's the reason they didn't want you to talk to the Germans. If they talked, came up to you that's fine but you don't start the conversation.

Q: And is that something they told you or you just learned it?

MC: About bribing them?

Q: Yeah.

MC: Oh you were told. There was quite an organization in the camp.

55:09-1:00:28

Q: Do you think that there are misconceptions that people have about what went on that need to be corrected?

MC: Well I don't know what most people think. Of course some people think that it was nice to be there that you were in a safe place you're out of war and everything but that wasn't the case.

Q: Yeah, yeah that's pretty rough.

MC: You always worried what could happen.

Q: Well yeah and you don't know how long you're going to be there.

MC: Yeah, that's right, that's right.

Q: That's really hard.

MC: There was never a doubt in your mind that we're gonna win this war but how long will it take. And what'll happen, what'll happen in the end when we win it. Now they talk about one prison camp where um, uh the Germans were bragging about winning the war and everything and they said uh, that we're gonna win this war and when we do you're gonna, you're gonna rebuild all of the bombed out buildings. If we don't, don't win the war, you won't see it. So there was the threat.

Q: Yeah so meaning they would keep you in the camps and make you do labor?

MC: Execute you.

Q: Or execute you?

MC: Yeah.

Q: Wow, that's scary.

MC: Yeah.

Q: That's really scary. So what did you do when you came back home? Did you stay in the military?

MC: No, (laughs), no I did fly in the National Guard but that was the National Guard that wasn't the, in the Air Force.

Q: And so did you move back to Idaho?

MC: I hadn't left except, uh, that's the time I left was college and the war.

Q: And so then what did you do?

MC: Well, uh, I worked for the University of Idaho extension service, which doesn't mean too much to you but the extension service uh, had, my job was in Ada County here to run the 4H Program.

Q: That's kind of fun, is that with kids too?

MC: Yeah. It was all kids.

Q: All kids. So what ages?

MC: From ten to sixteen.

Q: And what kind of programs were they?

MC: Well of course you had your 4H clubs you know your livestock clubs your home-ec clubs and those were the main ones then.

Q: And do you like Idaho, what do you love about Idaho?

MC: I never, I saw a lot of different places and I never saw a place that I'd trade.

Q: And what city were you born in?

MC: Right here in Meridian.

Q: And tell me about the farm were on.

MC: Well it started out raising, raising during the depression raising everything that you can imagine; dairy cows, horses, pigs, chickens, turkeys, that was the sole existence then.

Q: And was it your folks' farm?

MC: Well they bought it, yeah.

Q: And now you're gonna sell it?

MC: We'd sure like to. If you got any offers why we'll take them.

Q: And so you're just growing corn now?

MC: Mostly corn and winter wheat.

Q: And do you miss working?

MC: Not, not at all. It'd be nice to be able to do something that's the problem now.

Q: Yeah. How are you gonna celebrate your birthday?

MC: How do I? It's just another day.

Q: Just another day, I know that's how I feel too.

MC: Yeah.

Q: The more birthdays you have the less you care about them.

MC: That's right and the quicker they come.

Q: Yeah, yeah that's true that's true. Well is there anything else you wanna tell me? I think you've got some pretty good stories.

MC: Well I've told you all I can remember (laughs).

1:00:29-1:07:13

Q: Oh that's what I wanted to ask you, how did you come up with that title?

MC: I got a, I used to have, I don't, that was in a film that I, I had several films, which I cant find now, and it was in one of them, that comment. They were telling about how heavy the losses were, particularly in the first part of the war.

Q: And do you know how many planes were shot down in the whole war?

MC: There was, you mean B17s? They manufactured 12,000 and I think about a third of them or so were lost. There, I have seen that figure but I can't remember now. There was uh, there was a lot of them lost.

Q: What were the Germans flying? What kind of planes did the Germans fly?

MC: Messerschmitts 109 and Focke-Wulfs and then of course they had bombers too but I don't know what they called them. The Messerschmitts, the fighters were the ones that we were concerned about.

Q: And so when you flew and you dropped the bombs could you see them detonate?

MC: The bombardier could. No one, no one else could (laughs).

Q: Could you hear it, as high up as you were?

MC: No, no.

Q: No. So it was just flying then for you?

MC: Of course, the thing is that your own plane is making so much noise that you wouldn't hear the explosions.

Q: So you're just looking for the fighters coming at you?

MC: Yeah. Of course you're concerned with staying in formation. So you're, the pilot all he's doing is keeping an eye on that plane next to him, because that guy is watching another plane.

Q: Was there ever a time, besides when you got shot down and got captured, that you had to get out of formation or that you were forced out of formation?

MC: Oh no no. I don't know quite what you mean.

Q: Well I just wonder like how many planes are in the formation?

MC: Depends on what time in the war, when I was flying eighteen. Eighteen in a formation and then there's a, you might say a lead formation, then a thousand feet above another eighteen and, a thousand feet below another eighteen.

Q: That's a lot.

MC: Oh yeah.

Q: I didn't realize it was that many.

MC: During the later part of the war they talk about these big formations coming over. On one of the articles they said it took a half, a, the thing is, these formations follow each other, these three formations they're following another one and they said it took a half hour for the entire groups to pass a certain point.

Q: Hmm...

MC: So you think of thousands of, the number of planes were in the thousands.

Q: Think of that from a civilians perspective looking up.

MC: Oh yeah.

Q: Wow. That's pretty amazing. So what do you think of what they fly now?

MC: Well, at the time I flew a B17 was the biggest plane made and the 24. So times have changed.

Q: Did you ever want to fly anything smaller or did you like flying the big one?

MC: I enjoyed flying the big ones. The 17 was a real easy plane to fly and it uh, had lots of memories.

Q: Did you ever think about flying commercially?

MC: No, lots of fellas did but the problem was after the war of course everything about flying four-engine, four-engine passenger planes, but after the war four-engine pilots were a dime a dozen. There were lots of fellas that wanted to fly commercial, they're just, and, in my case I was still only a second lieutenant and here they had majors and colonels you know who would've had a priority. And would've had a lot more time in a four-engine plane than I did.

Q: Yeah, well since you worked in agriculture did you ever think about crop dusting?

MC: No, I want nothing to do with that.

1:07:14-1:17:36

Q: Yeah, well I think that's about it unless there's anything else you wanna tell me about it.

MC: I can't think of anything. I was trying to think of interesting things that, one you talk about whether there were funny things that happened.

Q: Oh yeah.

MC: One time I was walking around this path and I noticed down by one fence there was quite a group of POWs at this fence and I couldn't figure out what was going on. I went down there and just outside, just outside the uh, the camp you might say, there was a German area, a compound where the guards stayed and there was a so-called hospital out there. And there was a, and your mail came in there, and they had censors, lady censors and here's some of these ladies and they're sunbathing out along side of their barracks of course prisoners were watching that (laughs). And uh our commandant in his book commented on this he said these guys are down there gawking at the women he said I had to put a stop to it and tell the girls to go inside but I took one last look myself (laughs).

Q: That's pretty funny. So it was probably something new to look at huh?

MC: Yeah. (laughs)

Q: Probably been awhile for some of you guys?

MC: And another thing that's kind of interesting um, we had a radio in camp. I never, I never had, off and on, why news would come into the camp, or maybe I'll explain a little. The barracks were divided into little rooms and there was a big everything was open but there were little segments, I forget how to word it. But everyone would call out in the barracks "Gin time," gin meaning information. And we'd all gather in one place and they'd read the BBC news about the war and everything, and I always wondered how do they get that news? Well you knew they had to have a radio after the war in some of the books I read, it told about how they got the radio. They, one time the, out in the, in this area outside the Germans called in *Vorlorgger (?)*, I remember that now, and uh there was a so-called hospital out there. Well one time one of their prisoners was taken and their guard will take you over there to, to the hospital, and one time this one prisoner, they took him over there and sent him back, just sent him back to the compound, and as he went by here was this radio that the guards were using, sitting on a table there, he just picked it up, stuck it under his coat and when they got it back to the camp, to the compound, they took it all a part and hid pieces of it all around and shortly after this, the German made a surprise inspection trying to find this radio. Well of course they never did because it was all in little pieces. Then eventually they put it back together. Well in these little, I'm trying to think of what we used to call those, they were little rooms, six to eight, not rooms sections six to eight people, there was one table and it had four by four legs on it, well what they do, they take out a leg and hollow it out and put the radio down in there. And when they, and left a nail there and when they wanted to hear the news they ran a wire from the lights down to that nail and into the radio.

Q: That's pretty clever.

MC: (Laughs).

Q: Because how would you hide it otherwise? You wouldn't have anywhere to hide it right?

MC: Yeah. No, no. They were always pulling inspections ya know, they'd even get you out of bed for an inspection to make sure you didn't have time to hide something. Because they were always looking for contraband you might save.

Q: The radio I can see how they got it but what other kind of stuff did they think you would get?

MC: Well I don't know.

Q: That's interesting.

MC: Unless they were looking for things that the guard could be bribed to be brought in.

Q: So how did you feel about the politics of the war? Or were you just doing your duty?

MC: Yeah, your duty, you knew what you had to do you were trained to do it. My only problem was I got in the war too early.

Q: Why, why do you say that?

MC: Cause when we were flying we didn't have any fighter escort they didn't come until a month or two later.

Q: What would the escorts do?

MC: Protect the formations. Fend off the German fighters.

Q: So yeah, then things would be different then?

MC: Oh yeah, in fact flying it wasn't too bad toward the end of the war, why guys wanted to fly to get their missions in. We were supposed to fly twenty-five missions and the average life of a combat crew is six to eight missions.

Q: That's not very good odds is it?

MC: So you knew what you were gonna get it's just a matter of when and where.

Q: So how many missions did you fly?

MC: Six.

Q: So that was average huh?

MC: Yeah that was average.

Q: Wow.

MC: And of course the, now we got shot down October 9th and uh October 14th was the big Schweinfurt raid that you have referred to in which we lost sixty B17s on that one. So you, and ten men to a plane you know what the losses were.

Q: And what year was that?

MC: 43.

Q: When did the war officially end, 45?

MC: Yeah, June 6th. And we, we were in France on the 6th. So we heard the celebrations but we were already out of Germany.

1:17:37-1:23:15

Q: How'd you like France?

MC: How'd I like it?

Q: Yeah.

MC: Fine because I got to eat.

Q: French food or American food?

MC: American food.

Q: That's good. So did you visit any other places in Europe?

MC: Did I?

Q: Yeah besides England and France, and Germany obviously?

MC: Well other than Denmark.

Q: Well yeah Denmark was no fun though.

MC: No, really never had the desire to go back and see any of the cities or anything but I would like to have maybe seen the prison camp.

Q: In the book didn't you guys, you said there were three versions of the story your version and your two buddies about how you got a car.

MC: Oh.

Q: After the, tell me about that.

MC: Um, when we were liberated why of course the war had to go on they couldn't they couldn't stop for us, so we were supposed to, we were ordered to stay in the camp. We were walking around out by the gate one moment and we could see some of our, some of the prisoners on the other side, they were out. So, and there was a guard on the gate, American guard of course. And so we said, we asked him if we could go out and he said no one goes out this gate and we said those guys are out. And he said, there's a hole in the fence down there, that's the way they're getting out (laughs). So we went down found the hole and went out. Well we were walking down the road and here a civilian came driving a car, so we kicked him out and took the car and we went to a, the Army had set up checkpoints all along so we drove to one of the checkpoints to get gas and they filled up the gas tank and they said there's a spare wheel out there that'll fit this car and they gave us a spare wheel and everything and we took off to Munich. Well when we got to Munich we had military police you know stationed around and one of them motioned us into a courtyard and we had to get back to camp if we were gonna get out but he wouldn't let us out. But one of the fellas in the car with us had been an MP so he talked to this guy and explained everything and so we headed back to camp in a hurry. (laughs) Cause we knew that we were gonna be flown out and didn't want to be left behind.

Q: Well then, is that when you missed Patton coming?

MC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: How'd you feel about that were you upset?

MC: Well I'd have liked to have seen him. It was kind of funny uh, I read two or three versions of Patton coming into the camp. One was he was on a tank, another he was in a jeep and there was something about his pearl handle pistols too that I don't know whether he did have them or didn't have them, but there were several versions of when Patton came to camp. (laughs) But I didn't get to see him.

Q: Cause you were joyriding?

MC: (laughs) Yeah we were.

Q: Well what did it look like, what did Munich look like when you got there?

MC: You had to weave your way through the rubble it had been bombed real heavily.

Q: And were there any German civilians around still in Munich?

MC: Yeah there were civilians around in fact most of the towns you went through they'd have a white sheet hanging out the window to tell ya we give up.

Q: Yeah. Well then Hitler just kinda cowarded out in his little underground bunker.

MC: Yeah. Yup.

1:23:16-1:25:40

Q: So much for his people. Yeah that's horrible. What do you think about like other wars that we have? Viet Nam or Korea?

MC: Oh, I have mixed reactions. Uh all, mostly favorable but uh, I can't see, I haven't been able to completely understand this post-stress syndrome ya know they talk about. Ah, here we, we went out day after day ya know, knowing you're gonna to get shot and here these people come back and but, I can, they were kind of fighting a different kind of war. We saw what was coming they don't know what's coming. So I uh, I have mixed feelings.

Q: Yeah I wonder about that, the post-traumatic stress syndrome you hear of a lot of Viet Nam vets complaining about that or even guys coming back from Iraq or Afghanistan.

MC: Yeah, I uh, it's hard for me to understand it but I can see the other side to it. There must be something to it or there wouldn't be so many.

Q: Yeah. Well maybe, it is cause they're ground troops and they see something more violent looking?

MC: I don't think it's anything, but uh, knowing, it's afraid of running into a trap or these roadside bombs you know. I can see that'd be nerve wracking to be going up the road and here the truck in front of you blows up. So I can see, I can see their feeling there.

Q: Yeah, that'd be really scary.

MC: Yeah.

1:25:41-

Q: I was trying to think of some of the other stuff I read in the book.

MC: Oh I know one thing that interested me anyway. Um, one uh, in one, of course there were several prison camps and uh, they uh, they were moving prisoners from one camp to a less desirable camp and the Commandant didn't like it and was complaining and uh, so he uh, he said if, or he insisted they quit, he said if you don't quit we're going to riot. And he said there's, I don't know how many prisoners, but there are only four hundred of you and if we riot you'll kill a lot of us but we'll kill all of you. And they said it quit. And it quit.

Q: Wow.

MC: I always wondered too, there was always this question of will they execute you or wipe out the camp and uh, and one article I read was a, and this was I don't know if it was Stalag Luft III or not, but anyway one of the camps that they had prepared for it. My question was how were they prepared for it? And in this article they told how, they said the, when it starts to happen, we'll storm the fence in hopes that some get through to let the world know (chokes up) what happens, what happened?

Q: Wow.

MC: So that was always on your mind.

Q: Did you know about that at the time?

MC: No. It apparently wasn't in our camp. But there was lots, a lot of different camps, most of them are for infantry or ground troupes cause there was only two Airforce camps Stalag Luft III and a place they called Barth, which is up on the north sea or something. You don't hear much about it but you hear an awful lot about Stalag Luft III.

Q: Yeah why is that?

MC: I don't know, more this Great Escape for one thing that was widely publicized and a movie made and everything. Which wasn't very close.

Q: It wasn't very accurate?

MC: No. (laughs)

Q: No. I'm gonna have to watch that one. Did they take a little too much liberty with the story?

MC: One thing, Steve McQueen was in it, and he had a real wild motorcycle ride and he jumped fences and everything, eventually got caught, but that never happened. (laughs) There was never any ride like that.

Q: Did you say the camp or the barracks was for officers?

MC: Stalag Luft III was all officers, American and English.

Q: But did they treat, they brought in prisoners from other camps that weren't officers?

MC: In our camp?

Q: Yeah.

MC: Oh they brought in some enlisted me to do the menial work. They, and they were glad to do it because they were treated better. The officers were treated better than the enlisted men and, but they, uh, they didn't do real dirty work. They did, they ran the cook house cause they had boiling water in there.

MC: That's something, we don't have to do this and the colonel said all right you go back to your own camp. They didn't, they weren't over due and they were glad to do it but you always find one that complains or something.

END.