

Interviewer: So if you don't mind would you tell us your full name and when you were born?

Stack: My full name is James Thomas Stack and I was born in Cheatham County.

Interviewer: When were you born?

Stack: April 23, 1922

Interviewer: Nineteen twenty-two. And what branch of the service did you serve in?

Stack: Air Force

Interviewer: What was the primary unit you served?

Stack: Let's see 321st bomb group.

Interviewer: 321st Bomb group oh yeah you still have that. You had a picture could you show it to the camera of the type of airplane and maybe describe where you sat in the plane and what you did. Let's see do we need to turn it sideways?

Stack: This way?

Camera Man: Long ways landscape horizontal.

Interviewer: There we go. Now tell us where you sat in that airplane.

Stack: I sat in the tail of it right as far back as you could get.

Interviewer: And that's a Mitchell?

Stack: Mitchell

Interviewer: Twenty five B25 medium bomber and which Theatre did you see mostly? Were you in the European or were you in

Stack: I was in the European.

Interviewer: In the European Theatre. Can you tell me a little bit about before Pearl Harbor go back a ways. How seriously did you take the threat to American from the Nazi's? Did you think you were in the country and you were hearing these stories back before World War II. Did you read newspapers and keep up with the news about things that happened in 39 and 41 what was going on in Europe?

Stack: Well I don't recall that I was really thought a lot about it.

Interviewer: So it seemed did it seem kind of remote and far away?

Stack: Yes

Interviewer: Yeah so you were telling me a minute ago that you were working locally with measuring tobacco and then you wound up Detroit because the jobs were up there. And then what happened?

Stack: Well that's when I got drafted. I worked up there about a year and a half and my number came up. I tried to enlist in the air force to volunteer and they told me to just wait until I went in the service and then apply make an application to go to the air force. And so that's what I did but in the meanwhile before it came through I was sent to Aberdeen Maryland for went through bomb disposal school. One of those papers tells I've got a list of all the places I served in. And bomb disposal was one branch you didn't want to be in.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Stack: They told us that promotions came fast in the field.

Interviewer: So it was a high turnover rate.

Stack: So after I think it was about seven or eight months my transfer to the air force came through. And I was sent to North Carolina and I went to college for three months Davidson College.

Interviewer: What did you study?

Stack: Well I studies physics and history and I forgot a lot I did. I really don't know but I think that material there has listed how long I served there. And then they sent me to after I finished the college training at Davidson sent me to Nashville and I was there about a month and then they sent me to Colorado to take bomb training. And again that list there has how long I went there. Went from Denver to Fort Myers Florida and I learned to disassemble and assemble a 50 millimeter guns in that school.

Interviewer: That was was that an M2 Browning machine gun?

Stack: I don't know what kind a 50 millimeter.

Interviewer: Okay

Stack: And then from there they sent me to North Carolina Edwards North Carolina. And I took some more training preparedness to go overseas and I've forgotten when we was there that's listed.

Interviewer: That's fine.

Stack: But I think just three or four months. Then after that training we got our orders to go overseas. And so I ended up in Italy we landed at Naples Italy. I'll never forget that it was Christmas Eve night 1943. And we was only there about one or two days then they shipped us to Corsica the Island of Corsica and that's where we started flying missions.

Interviewer: Did you feel prepared?

Stack: Yeah I felt prepared. In fact I wasn't even scared. The first one I'll never forget on my 16th mission the antiaircraft was really they had us tuned in they had our altitude and those antiaircraft shells were bursting open all around us. And the pilot was making all the adjustments he could up and down you

know to try to avoid the antiaircraft fire. And the tail if you look at that picture here the tail of the B25 there wasn't very much room in it. And I'd always thought that I would just it was so hard to get in it with my parachute, we wore a breast parachute. So I'd drag my parachute back with me as far as and I thought well if we have problems and I have to jump out I'll be close enough and I can snap it on. Well I thought that my mike came unplugged and all that he was up and down and you can't believe all the places we was going. So I thought the plane was going down so I reached back to get my parachute well I got it but I couldn't get it through I was fixing to go out that day. And it's a good thing I couldn't because all those maneuvers he was making was to avoid the antiaircraft but we weren't hit. So from then on I never left my parachute behind. And I found out if I needed the thing I wasn't going to be able to put it on.

Interviewer: It's a good thing you learned that early right?

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Did you ever have to use that parachute?

Stack: No

Interviewer: Good

Stack: No I flew 46 combat missions. Now we never did get attacked by a German fighter the air force was just about wiped out when we got over there. So all the missions that I flew were to ____ Pass in northern in Italy and Austria. And the targets were railroad bridges and things that's the way the Germans were getting their supplies in was down ____ Pass. So they tried to keep telephone the railroad tresses knocked out. Now we never were attacked by German fighters because in 1944 most of the German air force was had been knocked out. So what bombing they did was small ones and the well I'm getting mixed up. See it was the German air force.

Interviewer: So you took out railroads and like did you were you all assigned to take out any industrial areas?

Stack: No

Interviewer: Or things like that?

Stack: No

Interviewer: No okay

Stack: No just the railroad track down through there ____ Pass.

Interviewer: So what was what were your living quarters like while you were I'm guessing you were stationed in Italy most of the time.

Stack: Well when we first went over there we were stationed on Corsica.

Interviewer: On Corsica

Stack: I don't know where it's at I can show you a picture that we lived in an area just had a tent.

Interviewer: Oh you were just in a tent.

Stack: A small tent.

Interviewer: So you didn't have barracks?

Stack: Not on Corsica no. This was in January.

Interviewer: And cold was it cold?

Stack: Cold

Interviewer: Yeah

Stack: But somebody figured out to heat with gasoline you had to be careful you know with that. I remember the first time I stood guard duty at night. The guy I was with had a five gallon can he filled it with gasoline drained the gasoline out of the plane parked there. And he struck a match to start it and I thought he was going to blow us up. But nothing happened only except it caught on fire and we stayed warm with it. When he started throwing that match in the bucket of gasoline I thought you are going to blow us up. But as long as the opening of the can was the same as the can itself you could throw a match in it and it won't do nothing but burn. But if the top is smaller than the bottom of it

Interviewer: You've got a problem.

Stack: You've got a problem.

Interviewer: So take me through a day what was a typical day like in Corsica where you were stationed? You'd get up in the morning you were in your tent and its cold did you have to heat your water?

Stack: The first thing you do is go to breakfast and if we are not scheduled to fly that day as far as I remember we just stayed around the tent.

Interviewer: And what how did you pass the time? Did you get bored?

Stack: Yeah you get bored. I really don't recall what we did.

Interviewer: Did you play cards?

Stack: Yeah we played cards.

Interviewer: What about Betty Greybull did you see many posters pin up posters of Betty Greybull?

Stack: I don't recall.

Interviewer: No

Stack: All the planes we had had pictures of women on the side.

Interviewer: Was there one on the plane was there one particular plane you tended to be in or did you swap up each time?

Stack: As far as I remember we'd swap up.

Interviewer: So tell me about you know this is now a big art form now the women on the planes. Do you remember the names of any of them?

Stack: No I don't remember I don't remember the names.

Interviewer: So you told me that sitting in the back in the tail section was pretty cramped. I've never seen what that looks like so is there a seat do you sit on the floor?

Stack: Well no there was a little seat that you straddled and sat on. And of course you were surrounded in plexiglass. Now we never were attacked by enemy planes I may have said that before.

Interviewer: Yeah but you said you could see the antiaircraft.

Stack: We could see the antiaircraft exploding.

Interviewer: I bet that made your heart skip a beat.

Stack: Yeah the only enemy plane we ever saw was a German fighter he was flying way out from us to close to shoot at him. But he was trying to get our altitude so he could relay it to the antiaircraft people on the ground so they could try to zoom in on the American plane.

Interviewer: Well that was an exciting moment. You didn't know what was going to happen next did you?

Stack: The closest I ever came was the day that I couldn't get my parachute on.

Interviewer: Right

Stack: A section a piece of one of the antiaircraft shells broke out at hole hit the plexiglass and broke a hole in it. It didn't hit me.

Interviewer: Thank goodness. Well I'm glad you didn't sustain any injuries like that while you were there. So after you left how long were you at Corsica? Did they station you someplace else later?

Stack: As the American troops advanced drove the Germans back up there was more room behind them. So they moved us over to the mainland in Italy.

Interviewer: Did you get to sleep in barracks then or were you still in a tent?

Stack: No we were in a building I don't recall what it was used for prior to. But it was inside we didn't have to sleep in a tent anymore.

Interviewer: Well that's good.

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Did you while you were there did you see much destruction?

Stack: I really don't remember.

Interviewer: So did you stay in Italy or did you go to another place?

Stack: No we stayed in Italy until Hitler surrendered and the war ended in the European Theatre about that time. Let's see I forget whether it was May or June. They didn't keep us very long once Hitler Surrendered they started shipping us out. Now we didn't know where we were going. There was a lot of rumors everybody thought we were headed to the Pacific Theatre. But I guess we were about half way across the Atlantic when the news came that Japan had surrendered.

Interviewer: That was a relief.

Stack: What?

Interviewer: I bet that was a relief.

Stack: It was yeah it was. So they changed the direction a little and we got to Boston from there they sent us somewhere in I think it was Ohio. And then from there they gave us furloughs so we got to spend a lot of December at home in 44. And reported back to I think we had about 6 weeks at home and after that we reported back to some place in Louisiana I don't remember it's probably on that sheet. It's where I got my discharge.

Interviewer: So were you a sergeant?

Stack: Staff sergeant.

Interviewer: Staff sergeant at that time. So then what did you do after the war?

Stack: Well went back to Detroit and I got discharged near the end of October I think in 1944. And I had just spent five or six weeks at home prior to that so I went back to Detroit they were required to give you your job back.

Interviewer: Where you working in Detroit?

Stack: A place called Thompson Products.

Interviewer: Okay

Stack: They drag lengths and tie rods for automobiles.

Interviewer: Did you use the GI bill?

Stack: Yes I don't know whether I'd ever got through college or not if it hadn't been for the GI bill.

Interviewer: Where did you go?

Stack: I went back to Austin Peay and finished up my degree at Austin Peay and went to then to Peabody. And did my masters and then I continued well I started teaching at Clarksville High School. And I had time left on the GI bill so I went every summer I've forgotten how many summers now until I used it up working on a doctorate. But I never did get the doctorate.

Interviewer: Well I understand that you used to teach at Austin Peay State University.

Stack: Thirty three years.

Interviewer: In the math department?

Stack: Yeah when I was hired as a teacher at Austin Peay I was the only fulltime teacher in the Mathematics Department.

Interviewer: Really

Stack: And now I think they have about 28 or 29.

Interviewer: Yeah it's a big department now.

Stack: I think my clock is sick.

Interviewer: Yeah it says its 2 o'clock. So when did you retire from Austin Peay?

Stack: Nineteen eighty-seven.

Interviewer: Well I'm sure there's a lot of students that owe their degree to your teaching. Thirty three years that's a long time.

Stack: Yeah I taught some real outstanding students. Taught several that went ahead and got their doctorate.

Interviewer: Really so I see you wear a wedding ring you got married.

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Did you get married right after the war?

Stack: Yeah it wasn't long. I got out was discharged in October end of October 1944 and got married in December 44.

Interviewer: Was it a girl from Ashland City or from Detroit?

Stack: No from Portland.

Interviewer: Portland Tennessee?

Stack: Yeah no we met at Austin Peay the year I was a freshman she was a freshman and we had some classes together.

Interviewer: Did she write you while you were in Italy?

Stack: Yeah I used to get letters from her.

Interviewer: And so you came back and you got married a couple of months after you were discharged and you had children.

Stack: We had three four no three.

Interviewer: You had three children. And how many grandchildren do you have now?

Stack: Oh let's see there's two, four, six no eight I guess. I'm forgetting one set.

Interviewer: Congratulations I see pictures of them they're graduating that's wonderful.

Stack: Yeah that's my grandsons up there.

Interviewer: Well I certainly appreciate you taking time to sit with me and talk about what happened in the 40s during World War II.

Stack: Yeah my wife passed away six years ago.

Interviewer: I'm so sorry. Did you ever keep up with the people you served with? Did you all have reunions or anything like that?

Stack: No

Interviewer: Well sometimes that happens.

Stack: I mentioned when we went overseas there were groups we had groups assigned in our overseas training. And we were supposed to fly as a group but it didn't make sense you know to put a whole group on a plane that had no experience that lacked experience. So we had to fly with some other experienced group before we were allowed to go together. And meanwhile the pilot that we went over with got killed.

Interviewer: Oh dear

Stack: He was flying with another group when the plane caught antiaircraft fire and went down. And he survived the fall but the Germans shot him down in the street.

Interviewer: Oh my

Stack: The reason we know that another gunner I think was had been shot down and of course the Italians they had underground most of the people that were shot down they were able to slip them out and get them back reunited with their group they were supposed to be with. But he was in a house getting ready to for them to slip him back and he witnessed this pilot being shot. His last name was Crutchfield.

Interviewer: The pilot was Crutchfield?

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Crutchfield

Stack: Crutchfield he was from Texas. And we had a one gunner that was from Memphis I've forgotten his I think I've forgotten all of their names except for Crutchfield.

Interviewer: You had a gunner from Memphis.

Stack: What?

Interviewer: You were about to say something about a gunner from Memphis.

Stack: We trained with him he went over with us.

Interviewer: Okay

Stack: But he made it back he didn't well a couple of other things. They after so many missions and all most everybody got an air medal.

Interviewer: Did you get an air medal?

Stack: Yeah it's in that.

Interviewer: Oh I saw that. Did it have a ribbon did you get a medal with a ribbon? Let's see here it is. The 12th headquarters the 12th air force the air medal is awarded to James T. Stack Sergeant air core 321st imbardment group M. There it is. I appreciate you giving me copies of these papers Mr. Stack that helps a lot 1945. Do you remember where you were when you received this air medal?

Stack: We was in Italy.

Interviewer: You were in Italy when they gave it to you?

Stack: I've forgotten how many clusters I have _____. I had a total of 46.

Interviewer: Forty six

Stack: Forty six missions.

Interviewer: Uh huh

Stack: And after about 15 missions they'd give you a week's leave. So my first leave was to Rome I got to go to Rome and spend a week there. Visited the Coliseum and St. Paul's and well a lot of other places I can't think of. Then the second leave I got was to I can't think of the name of it either.

Interviewer: It will come back. Did you learn to speak any Italian while you were there?

Stack: No

Interviewer: No what about the food did you enjoy the food?

Stack: Yes good food. We had the infantry man did they'd fly us we had fresh eggs all the time they'd fly them out of North Africa.

Interviewer: Really did you get to know any of the civilian population?

Stack: No

Interviewer: You didn't mix very much.

Stack: What's the name of the city in Italy where the water it's under.

Interviewer: Venus?

Stack: Venus yeah

Interviewer: So you got to see Venus Italy?

Stack: I got to spend a week there.

Interviewer: Wow that's wonderful. You said you were at Naples let's see Mount Vesuvius that's a place a lot of people will go sometimes in that area. Did you get to ride a gondola?

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: That was quite a change for a young man from Ashland City Tennessee. Was that your flight over there was that the first time you'd been on an airplane during your training and all of that? Had you been on an airplane before you got into the air force?

Stack: No

Interviewer: What made you want to go in the air force?

Stack: Well I thought flying a plane was better than fighting on the ground.

Interviewer: Okay a lot of young men look for some adventure when they get out. So you'd have been your what 20s yearly 20s during that time?

Stack: Yeah I was 21 I guess when I got drafted.

Interviewer: Did you have family members that served at the same time did you have any brothers or cousins that were over there about the same time you were?

Stack: No I never all the time I was in the service I think I saw two people I had known before the service.

Interviewer: Now your parents they were from this area right Ashland City area?

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Were you an only child?

Stack: No I had two brothers and two sisters. They are all loving except one one of my brothers passed away with pancreatic cancer.

Interviewer: I'm sorry to hear that. Now were you the oldest in the family?

Stack: Yes

Interviewer: It must have been very hard on your mother. It must have been very hard to see you go.

Stack Yeah she wrote me letters right often.

Interviewer: And then you had your sweetheart writing to you too.

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Can I ask what her name was?

Stack: Anise Mary Anise Law

Interviewer: Mary Anise Law so you looked forward to the mail delivery.

Stack: Yes

Interviewer: Letters from home.

Stack: Yeah my wife had a brother that was killed in service World War II.

Interviewer: Do you remember where he was?

Stack: He was in Australia.

Interviewer: That's a long ways from home too isn't it?

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: Yeah very long way. I had an uncle that served in Australia.

Stack: He was buried in let's see Hawaii I think. Anyway they didn't bring him back.

Interviewer: You said she was from Portland Tennessee.

Stack: Yeah

Interviewer: That's where her people were. Well thank you so much Mr. Stack for walking down memory lane with me and giving me a birds-eye view of what it was like to be sitting in the tail of a B25 Mitchell B25. I believe that was named after Billy Mitchell wasn't it?

Stack: I don't know.

Interviewer: If I remember right Billy Mitchell was one of the first aviators he was very renowned as an aviator and so the Mitchell stayed in service for a long time to the B25 stayed in service for quite a awhile as a medium range. So unless you think of anything else you'd like to share I guess we'll just call it a day. Thank you again

Stack: Well you're quite welcome it's been a pleasure.

Interviewer: It's been a pleasure to talk with you.