

Smith: Will you record the sound and the picture both?

Interviewer: Yes sir

Smith: I guess you can edit it later.

Interviewer: Yes can you give us your full name and when you were born?

Smith: I'm Claude Herbert Smith and I was born January 19, 1920 in Warrenton. So you can figure out how old that makes me that 82 so I'm a WWII veteran and their leaving us real fast. They say they are dying at a rate of 15,000 a day did George tell you that?

Interviewer: No he didn't mention that to me.

Smith: Well right now their dying at that rate so they will all be gone pretty soon.

Interviewer: Can you tell us which branch of service you were in?

Smith: I was in the Army Air Core they call that during the war. After the war they made a separate service and made it the Army Air Force not the Army Air Force but the US Air Force. So I was in the 15th Air Force in Italy and flew a tour of missions with the 15th.

Interviewer: Going back a little bit before that do you have any recollection of the great depression?

Smith: Very much so I was born in 1920 and of course everything went to pot in 1933 I was 13 years old. And we lost our farm out in Warrington and it was a terrible situation when people were starving. I mean we didn't we managed to get by. But I do recall I was right through the middle of it and

Interviewer: Were you old enough to have a job before you went into the service?

Smith: Yeah I worked at the County Agents Office when I went into the service. I think I made \$150 a month something like that. Well I worked at the drug store before that and I made \$12 a week seven days a week. So that's what the depression was all about.

Interviewer: Before Pearl Harbor did the average American take seriously the threat from Nazi Germany and Japan?

Smith: Did they realize the threat of Germany I think so. Of course when the war broke out everybody had to go and everybody was pulling together and we realized if we didn't defeat Hitler it would be the end of the world as we knew it you know.

Interviewer: Do you recall where you were December 7, 1941?

Smith: Oh yes very well. I was in the Paris Theatre up in north Cornersville it was on a Sunday afternoon. And we came out of the show and every day was they had just gotten the news and they was all excited and everything. Almost everybody remembers where they were on that day Pearl Harbor.

Interviewer: Did you get to hear FDR's speech the following day the

Smith: Yes I did. Of course he was a great man along with Winston Churchill and those two brought us through the war.

Interviewer: So you approved of how FDR handled the early part of the war?

Smith: Beg your pardon.

Interviewer: You approved of how FDR handled the early portion of the war?

Smith: Yeah because he was a great leader and inspired the whole nation.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you enlist into the service?

Smith: Well I was drafted I had gone to Birmingham to volunteer for the fighter training in the Army Air Core and took all of the exams and passed them and was ready to go when it came. But I had to have a release from the draft board before they would take me. And I came home and they had sent out my notice that day. So I didn't get to go that way later I did join the Air Core and was in pilot training for a short while.

Interviewer: After you were drafted did you have a preference as to which branch you wanted to be in?

Smith: The Battalion?

Interviewer: After you were drafted did you prefer which branch you wanted to be in like infantry, artillery, engineers were you still hoping for the Air Core?

Smith: I went from here to Fort McPherson Georgia. That letter was where I was leaving to that she handed you. And they classified you, you took all of these exams and everything and decided where they wanted you. So I ended up going into the signal core but I was attached to the Air Core and was sent to Drew Field in Tampa Florida for basic training. And from there I went all over the United States before I finally went overseas.

Interviewer: In the beginning of your basic training what was your impression of your fellow recruits?

Smith: My impression of what?

Interviewer: Of your fellow recruits that were going through training?

Smith: They were all great guys just like me and we were dedicated. One of the worst things that happened to all of us we would be training in one place and get to know some of the boys and get to be good friends and then they would ship us off in all different directions and separate us see. So that was tough but they were the cream of the crop of the nation was in the service at that time. And I went on like I said I went from Drew Field I went into the Air Core and pilot training for a while then I went on to radio school then to flight training in Boise Idaho with a crew and we went overseas as a crew. And we stayed together for the rest of the war there was 10 of us on this B24 and I've got a picture of the crew here somewhere. But anyway we flew our mission together and came home together after the war. And in the process you were shot down twice.

Interviewer: How did you recover from that?

Smith: Beg your pardon.

Interviewer: Did ya'll parachute out or?

Smith: Yeah we parachuted out one time and we crash landed on this little island off the coast of Yugoslavia the second time. We had a navigator wounded and we had to land on this little island and we got out of there the next day. But the B24 we landed in is still on the island I'm sure because it couldn't take off had a little 2,000 foot fighter strip and the B24 requires a 5,000 strip to land well we landed on it and survived everybody survived.

Interviewer: Was your basic training was that the first time you had been a great distance away from home?

Smith: Yeah that was the first time I had ever really been away from home for any length of time. I spent my first Christmas away from home at Drew Field and it was the first time I was away from home and it was sort of home sick for a while you know.

Interviewer: Did you think the training you received prepared you for the task ahead of you?

Smith: Did I what?

Interviewer: Did you feel like the training that you got stateside prepared you for what you had to do?

Smith: Oh yes we had some wonderful training. We all trained in our specialties and we ended up in Lincoln Nebraska and we were put together as a crew and there was 10 men on this B24 bomber. There is a picture of it of course they had the pilot, the co-pilot, the navigator and the bombardiers there was four officers and there was six enlisted men which included the radio operator and engineer and four gunners. And we got together at Lincoln and went to Boise Idaho and we trained as a crew then we went overseas from there finished our state training.

Interviewer: Where were you first stationed when you went overseas?

Smith: Well we went by boat and it took us nine days to get to Naples Italy and we were stationed at a little village up inland at Italy called Venosa. And I was never off the base the whole time I was over there except on missions of course and about half way through our missions we were sent to Island of Brea for rest camp for a week which was quite an experience.

Interviewer: How were the living conditions on the boat you said you were on there for nine days?

Smith: I believe we had 10,000 troops on there we were sort of crowded it was a converted ocean liner we had two meals a day on the trip over there. And it wasn't the best of conditions but we were okay.

Interviewer: When you first arrived at that little village were you in temporary barracks or were they permanent barracks.

Smith: You mean when we were in Italy?

Interviewer: Yes sir.

Smith: We were in tents. We lived in when we got overseas they threw us a big ten it was about oh I'd say 12x12 or 15x15 and had to put it together and we all lived in one tent the crew. The officers had a tent just like ours and the six enlisted men lived in another tent. So we scrounged around and got materials from old airplanes and so forth put windows in it had a stove. It was rather cold there in Italy it snowed where we were inside Italy. But we flew our first mission to Salsborough Austria. Molly kept this picture out of the paper and I believe that's the mission we were on it shows the smudge pots we were really on the way to Munich and this was our first alternate target. We hit a lot of cloud cover and had to turn around and bomb Salsborough which is a beautiful city. I've never been there but we bombed all kind of targets when we were shot down and had to bail out we were coming back from a mission and the Air Force was all shot up. So there was five of us got together for protection and we saw this small town down there and according to intelligence they didn't have a lot of anti-aircraft. So there was five of us in formation and we had already dropped down to 20,000 feet so they had a big marshaling yard with hundreds of railroad cars. So we went in and we hit the target but they did have anti-aircraft guns in there so they shot down three of the five of us. So we had to bail out shortly and the T-Dos Partisans picked us to you probably remember him or have heard of him. He occupied portions of Yugoslavia all during the war Tee Toe. So they got ahold of us which we were fortunate and got us back to Italy.

Interviewer: The equipment you trained with did you feel like it operated pretty well in combat?

Smith: Yeah very good. We had the best I'm sure. The Germans had good equipment too. The 88 millimeter anti-aircraft gun they said was the best gun of the war. And if we got too low they could shoot you down like a sitting duck. That was our main opposition was anti-aircraft fire rather than fighters. We had P38s and P51s that was good escorts they kept the fighters at bay pretty well.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you never left the bases except for on mission. What did you do for entertainment in your free time?

Smith: Well we finally got a radio my sister sent us a radio and we all listened to the radio. Plus we went to church on Sunday and we had sort of a rec building where we went did various things but we didn't have much to do except fly. And then I bailed out I got back to the base the next day in Yugoslavia and seven of the crew got the Purple Heart on the mission and they didn't get back as soon as me and the c-pilot got back we weren't injured at all. And they sent us on a mission the next day I mean quick. We were shot down one day and got back the next and sent us on another mission the next day. Which was a good idea I guess didn't give you time to think about it much.

Interviewer: During your missions did you ever feel sleep deprived like you were over worked. Did you feel like they did a good job giving you the proper nutrient that they could and

Smith: Say that again I don't hear very well.

Interviewer: Yes sir did during your mission did you ever feel sleep deprived or over worked or did you feel the US did a good job the military a good job

Smith: Well I guess everybody was over worked we were on missions all the time and we didn't have a whole lot of rest but all of us made it through. And we were fortunate there was a higher rate of

casualties in the air force than any other among the air men than any other branch of the service. I just got a book called Wild Blue have you ever heard of it?

Interviewer: No sir

Smith: It is by Steven Ambrose.

Interviewer: I've read a lot of his books.

Smith: He has written several war books.

Interviewer: Yes sir

Smith: And he finally wrote one about the 15th Air Force the book was about the men and boys who flew the B24s during WWII. They always felt like the 8th air force they flew B17s for the most part the Flying Fortress got all of the glory. But I used to tease my buddies that they got the glory but we did all of the work the B24s. He points that out in that book he said that was true. But I said we might not have won the war but we could not have won it without the B24s. They were used by the Navy and all branches of the service.

Interviewer: Were you promoted during your service time?

Smith: Was I what?

Interviewer: Promoted?

Smith: Yeah I came home as a Tech Sergeant that's a five striper. The engineer and the radio operator were Tech Sergeant the other crewmen were Staff Sergeants.

Interviewer: For the most part did you feel the promotions were received by the people who deserved them?

Smith: Maybe this book The Wild Blue sort of featured McGovern you remember him he was a candidate for Vice-President maybe President I don't know later on. But he pointed out that he and his crew landed on the Ile of This which was a small island we landed there before they did. And we had the navigator wounded and we had 400 holes in our ship and I felt like our pilot was more deserving than he but he did not get the distinguished flying card. But maybe all of us should have I don't know. But we if you want me to get into any details on this stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah

Smith: We were shot down we didn't go down immediately so I had time to send out an SOS and tell them where we were bailing out. We bailed out in a rural section of Yugoslavia very rugged snow Cap Mountains and everything. That's the reason seven of them got the Purple Heart by breaking their ankles and injuries like that. But anyway we didn't know at the time who was going to pick us up the Germans or we hoped we landed in the Pocket of Parsons. So when I bailed out we were about 8,000 feet and I pulled the rip cord and nothing happened so I gave it all the strength I had and that time it opened and I saw a little plowed field way off at an angle. I just said a silent prayer said God please let

me land in that field and I floated just as straight to that field as if I were sliding down a string. When I hit the ground I saw a village in a distance and it was just like a bunch of ants all the people in the village were coming out toward me and I sort of went down behind a hill. And this little boy about like Dalton you saw here came running at me out of breath and he had a red star on his cap and knew that was Partisans so I just sort of relaxed and gave him some candy I had in my pocket and so forth. And a whole bunch of people came over the hill from the village and there was a platoon of soldiers and they came up to me and saluted and I couldn't understand their language but anyway he told one of the soldiers to pick up my parachute which he did. And that night when we were picked up by a C47 they threw the parachute in the plane that's the reason a lot of people still ask me well how did you get your parachute back. But anyway I got it back but finally a big tall man came up and he spoke fluent English and he started talking to me and he was originally from Boston and he was my interpreter from then on. So he got all of the crew together and this C47 I had already sent out the SOS and told them where and incidentally Reggie Spit Fire circled me as I went down. When I hit the ground he came down and gave me the peace signal he was so close I could see the white of his eye. So he sort of pinpointed us so the plane could come in and get us. A C47 came over and landed and got us and we were back that night a record for the 15th air force for getting back for Yugoslavia.

Interviewer: Were you ever wounded in combat?

Smith: No I never was wounded. The only one that was wounded was our navigator he had a big he was seriously wounded when we landed on this little island they had to fly him back in a small plane back to Italy. And we had 400 holes in our ship the plane but only one was wounded.

Interviewer: So did you think the from what you knew the medical treatment was adequate?

Smith: Oh yeah we when we got back to Italy we got back to Berry Italy and checked us into this hospital which was a converted hotel made into a hospital. And that was I might be getting mixed up that was when we bailed out they got us over there and checked us into that hospital. And we walked into the lobby and our navigator who was wounded on a previous mission was in the hospital then he was sitting in the lobby with his bath robe on. Here came all of his crew dragging their parachutes and flight gear and everything.

Woman in the background: Coming in to see him.

Smith: Well he was surprised and we were surprised.

Interviewer: Did you feel that most soldiers had an idea of what the big picture in terms of strategy was?

Smith: I think so I mean everybody it wasn't like the Vietnam War and other wars they knew what they were there for and they knew what they were fighting for.

Tape ended