

Interviewer: Let me suggest what we do here if you're agreeable everyone's agreeable is why don't we if anyone feels like asking a question just jump in if you're okay with that.

Yoakum: I'm okay with that.

Interviewer: Were you so you were raised in East Tennessee raise on a farm in East Tennessee right.

Yoakum: I grew up on a farm yes.

Interviewer: What do you recall about the great depression?

Yoakum: Well I remember a man came to my dad and asked for a job and he couldn't afford to hire him. But I believe he did give him some corn to take the mill and grind for corn meal. But we didn't as far as I was concerned I didn't even know we had a depression I ate three meals a day and never went hungry.

Interviewer: Did you have any contact with the TVA or with the CCC camps?

Yoakum: Yeah I was aware of the CC but I was quite young when they were doing the work around the neighborhood. And the TVA did take part of my dad's farm and the lake that they created with Norris Dam was only about a mile away.

Interviewer: I've been to Norris Dam.

Interviewer 2: Dr. Zieren I just want to get this on tape as a preliminary. March 28, 2006 our interview subject for today is Mr. George L Yoakum former fighter pilot in WWII with the US Army Air Core. And Mr. Yoakum when were you born?

Yoakum: February 9, 1921.

Interviewer 2: Thank you sir.

Interviewer: Did you go to high school in East Tennessee?

Yoakum: I went to high school in Lafayette graduated in 1939. And I went to Beria College out of High School.

Interviewer: In Beria Kentucky?

Yoakum: In Beria Kentucky.

Interviewer: It's a pretty place isn't it?

Yoakum: Yes it is.

Interviewer: And did you graduate from college?

Yoakum: No WWII came along and my interest in flying began to override my education concerns. And so I volunteered.

Interviewer: Beria must have been a pretty small college back then wasn't it?

Yoakum: Fairly small yeah.

Interviewer: Five hundred students?

Yoakum: I don't remember the students but I do remember that every student had to work two hours a day.

Interviewer: Do you know about Beria College? It's a school that requires students to work as a portion of their tuition payment. And it specializes from people in the Appellation states Tennessee, West Virginia, Kentucky and it's not far it's just south of Richmond Kentucky Lexington Kentucky. And they have a beautiful campus I have a friend who used to work they have a gift shop sort of a craft shop and it was right on the main square and he used to work there. That's how I came to visit Beria one time. Were you interested in flying before or after Pearl Harbor?

Yoakum: Before I had obtained some colored photographs of airplanes and that sparked my interest in flying. And some of the ex-students came to visit the campus while I was there with their uniforms and wings on their tunic and that did it. I became more interested in flying than getting an education then but I had to wait until I was 21 to do it to join because my mom and dad wouldn't sign for me. So I waited until February to apply for the aviation cadet training program.

Interviewer: February of 42?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer: And do you recall Pearl Harbor do you remember what you were doing when you heard the news.

Yoakum: No I don't remember that too well. I do remember my older brother was already in the air force before Pearl Harbor and he tried to talk me out of joining.

Interviewer: Why?

Yoakum: Well he thought that the aviation cadet training program was going to be too tough for me I might not make it and be disappointed.

Interviewer: He was wrong wasn't he, he was mistaken. Where did you do your basic training?

Yoakum: My first assignment was in Nashville Classification Center and they separated us into three categories pilot, bombardier or navigator. And the strictest qualifications were for the pilot physically and mentally and everything. And then we went to Maxwell Field at Montgomery Alabama for preflight training. And from there then we went to primary flight training at Albany Georgia. And we flew the PT17 I believe they called it steer man open cockpit biplane. And I forget the number of weeks that we were there but we were going to school a half day and flying a half day.

Interviewer: And this was a training craft wasn't it?

Yoakum: Yes

Interviewer: What did you think of your instructors and of your fellow students?

Yoakum: Well our instructors were civilians. The military did the administrative work but the ground school and the flying instruction was by civilians and they were good at their job.

Interviewer 2: Sir before the time of Pearl Harbor were you aware of while you were going to school of the things that were happening in the world regarding the Japanese and the problems with the Germans?

Yoakum: I was aware of Hitler we had a student there from Germany who was sympathetic to Hitler's regime and my roommate almost got into a little straggle about it.

Interviewer 2: When did you first become aware sir that we were actually at war?

Yoakum: When I was at Beria.

Interviewer 2: At Beria and did you happen to hear President Roosevelt's speech the day following?

Yoakum: Yes

Interviewer 2: What was the primary source of news back then was it newspapers or radio or both.

Yoakum: We had both.

Interviewer: How big a training class was this in Albany? Is this is it Fort Stewart down there?

Yoakum: Its close by I don't know how far away.

Interviewer: How big a class were you with?

Yoakum: The number of students probably it would have been 20 or 25 they were split up into groups and we would be going to class at different times. Had upper class and lower class.

Interviewer: And you said you did flight instruction in the afternoon and class in the morning. What sort of subjects did they teach in the classes?

Yoakum: Well maps and charts and navigation I've got it all written down in here but so many I'm not sure whether I don't' one school might have been in preflight training we had morse code we had to lean morse code and be able to send and receive.

Interviewer: Well it just strikes me that the selection process for pilots and air core in general was very high very selective. And you must have scored well on the exams in order to be taken in that branch.

Yoakum: Yeah depth perception was one of the things that caused some of them to be eliminated. And they had a devise where you lined up something in a shadow box on strings you know and if you lined them up too far apart of course your depth perception was not very good. And depth perception was

important in landing an aircraft. You had to have a feel for how far off the ground you are when you are landing.

Interviewer 2: Did you ever do instruments only landings in fog or

Yoakum: No we didn't have that capability but we did fly instruments and some of them didn't fly every well and it cost them their life too.

Interviewer 2: How many personnel during the time that you were doing your flight training how many persons were lost just during your training?

Yoakum: I don't remember but it was not many.

Interviewer: Do you recall the first time you went up I mean do you recall the sensation of flying the first time?

Yoakum: Yeah that was the first time you take someone up they can easily be lost over their hometown or even over where they live. Your sense of direction is not good he could have taken me the instructor could have taken me ten miles away from the airport and I wouldn't know which way to go back to get in the beginning. But gradually that sense began to come and you would learn your sense of direction.

Interviewer: Did you feel exhilarated excited about flying?

Yoakum: Oh yeah

Interviewer: I can imagine.

Yoakum: When you're that young.

Interviewer 2: What was your favorite aircraft that you ever flew sir?

Yoakum: Well the B47 is the only large aircraft I ever flew beside the training planes.

Interviewer 2: In your mind how did it compare to, the theater of war was it Europe or the Pacific sir?

Yoakum: Europe we flew out of England.

Interviewer 2: How did you compare that aircraft to what the British and the Germans had?

Yoakum: Our aircraft supposedly by all the rules should have not have been able to maneuver with some of the German planes. The P51 could but however the P47 did very well if they got anyone on the tail of a P47 all they had to do was just dive. And there was not a plane in the sky that could stay up with the P47 and dive. So if you become under attack just dive.

Interviewer 3: What was the main aircraft that the Germans opposed the P47 with?

Yoakum: They had what they called a Faulk Wolf 190 and a Mr. Smith 109 were their two fighters that then they had other twin engine planes but they were not the other twin engine planes did attack the bombers but they were not good enough to engage with our fighters.

Interviewer: Did you ever see a ME262 the early Jap?

Yoakum: I didn't but some of our fellows did but the only way they could engage them was to dive down on them with excessive speed.

Interviewer 2: What was the feeling of the couple of people who ran into that? What was their description when they first talked about it?

Yoakum: Well the speed they were so impressed with the speed and of course you don't get to see them very long. Everything happens pretty fast.

Interviewer: So after your training in Georgia where did you go after that?

Yoakum: I went to New Port Arkansas for basic training. Went from a 225 horse power to a I believe it was a 400 something like 400 horse power. And it was a instead of a fabric covered wings fuselage it had aluminum. And had fixed landing gear but it had more instruments flight instruments that they could navigate at night with.

Interviewer: And how long did you stay there roughly a month a week six months?

Yoakum: Six or eight weeks I believe.

Interviewer: And did you feel confident that you were sort of learning the skills that you needed to learn to play the role of a fighter pilot?

Yoakum: That's where I was introduced to instrument flying. They had a cover they put over the student so he would be blind to the outside and the instructor then would do all kinds of unusual maneuvers to disorient the student and then he would say over the intercom okay you've got it bring it out. And you had to be able to bring it into level flight condition by using instruments. I was very lucky and having a knack for doing it and surprised my instructor he didn't he was dumbfounded and didn't think he thought it was cheating and had me to do it over and over again.

Interviewer: When did you go overseas?

Yoakum: After the checking out in the P47 down in Florida we went by train to Camp Myles Standish in Massachusetts and we had Christmas dinner there in 1943 and spent New Year's Day at sea going over to Liver Pool.

Interviewer 2: So you did Christmas Day here and a week later you were doing New Years in Liver Pool?

Yoakum: Yeah we boarded the troop ship in Boston Harbor and were at sea on New Year's Day.

Interviewer: Were you concerned about submarines German submarines?

Yoakum: Yeah there was concern about it but didn't worry the people who were as young as we were.

Interviewer: What kind of ship did they take you across on?

Yoakum: I forget what the name of it was it was just a regular troop ship as far as I know.

Interviewer: Was it like a converted passenger ship or something?

Yoakum: I'm not really sure what it was. But there was some navy pilots who were replacements on that troop ship and a lot of foot soldiers who got sea sick.

Interviewer 3: What were your living conditions like on the ship as an officer?

Yoakum: We ate with the ships officers and it was very good.

Interviewer 3: So you had a little bit more space than say the enlisted men on the ship?

Yoakum: Yeah somebody grabbed up some of the flying officer and said men down in such and such an area below the deck has got sea sick and they made a mess down there. Said I want you to go down there and have them to clean it up. And I was given one of those assignments and I knew better than to go down there trying to push my weight around, I would have been thrown overboard. I went to the First Sergeant and told him what I was down there for and he said "don't worry Lieutenant I'll take care of it." And that was as far as that was the end of my duty then.

Interviewer 3: Were the men allowed topside on the journey over?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer 2: Now sir when you started out you were an enlisted man as a cadet. At what point in the training did they discard you as an enlisted man and give you your officer ranks? Was that the same day also that you received your wings?

Yoakum: August the 30th 1943.

Interviewer: So let me recap this you were in training in one fashion or another for roughly a year and a half more than a year and a half before you finally started for Liverpool is that correct?

Yoakum: Well I went into Nashville on the 26th of October 42 and then.

Interviewer: So more than a year though.

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer: From October of 42 to December of 43.

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer 3: Was that an accelerated process in those days?

Yoakum: Yes the flight instructors were given instructions to solo a student in ten hours or less.

Interviewer: That's amazing.

Yoakum: Or out you go.

Interviewer: That's amazing ten hours or less.

Yoakum: If I would have been my instructor I wouldn't have had the nerve to send me up with seven hour I soloed in seven hours. Luckily though I didn't ground loop.

Interviewer 3: What were the conditions like when you go to England?

Yoakum: Well that was when they began to portion us out to go to different fighter groups. Now remember the one barracks building where we were for a while had these bunk beds. And one of the rules apparently was if you lights had to be turned out at 10 o'clock at night. And I noticed the wall was perforated with 45 caliber bullet holes. Some of those fellows were shooting the lights out. We were given a 45 caliber shoulder gun shoulder holster while we were still in the states and we had it with us on the troop ship and carried it at all times. Well somebody had shot holes in the walls of this barracks because they were too lazy to get up and turn the lights out.

Interviewer: Did you meet any of the British when you were living there?

Yoakum: It was a British base and there was a Canadian squadron on the same base we I was missioned. My squadron lived on the airport the other two were out on some old English castle nearby.

Interviewer: Were you able to go to pubs and drink beer?

Yoakum: Oh yeah

Interviewer 3: So how did the American and Canadian pilots get along together?

Yoakum: Well we went to the same mess hall and didn't have any problem. I do remember the first day we reported into the 356th fighter group we were waiting to meet Colonel Maelstrom. And while we were waiting three of those Canadian typhoons had gone out on what they call a rhubarb over across the channel and one hour later one of them had failed to return. And one of my buddies said, "I don't believe I'm gonna like this business." And it began to sink into him I guess that it's dangerous.

Interviewer 3: Do you remember any of the training proceeding D-Day?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer: What kind of training was that?

Yoakum: We didn't have any special training I remember my roommate and I went out on the bus going to town that night on June the 5th. And we noticed that they were painting white stripes on the airplane and we didn't know anything about why that was being done. And one of us made the comment maybe the invasion is coming off and sure enough it was. We came back to the base about midnight and I was

working in group operations as an assistant group operations officer every third day and I had pulled my shirt off preparing to go to bed and somebody came up in a jeep and grabbed me said get your clothes on quick and go to headquarters the invasion is on. So I had had a few drinks and when I got over there somebody was already on duty and I was supposed to help him plan the mission. And he took one look at me and said gave me some tomato just and said, "Here drink this you're not going to be any help for a while." But I remember that about 4 o'clock that morning before daylight all of the bombers were in the air circling to form to get into formation to fly out. And the noise and the drumming of those engines sounded like a swarm of bees if you've ever heard that bees swarming buzzing.

Interviewer: Did you have missions between the time you arrived in January of 44 and June?

Yoakum: Yeah I arrived at Morison Keith on late January and I started flying on the first mission early February and I lost my roommate on the third mission. He was taken prisoner of war.

Interviewer: Did he survive the war?

Yoakum: Pardon

Interviewer: Did he survive the war?

Yoakum: Yeah he bailed out and was his plane was burning and he suffered some burns but he survived and I did meet him in Dayton Ohio in later years. It was February

Interviewer: Sir most of the mission you flew were they bomber escort?

Yoakum: In the beginning when I got there the primary mission according to General Doolittle was to take the bombers over and bring them back safely. That was the primary objective and targets of opportunity were not our option. But later they changed our primary object to destroy the Luftwaffe and then we could leave the bombers if we saw a target a bomb or two especially a German plane.

Interviewer 2: What was the range of the P47 compared to the bombers?

Yoakum: Very short we in the beginning had one belly tank that limited our range I guess probably to about 300 miles out. And later then we got paper tanks 108 gallon paper tanks that we put under each wing and we extended our range out to 400 to 450 almost to Berlin.

Interviewer: And what raids did you participate in in sort of late winter and spring of 44? Do you remember the targets?

Yoakum: I don't remember the targets that the bombers had no.

Interviewer: Cologne for instance would have been a target Arurer.

Yoakum: Yeah in fact I flew across Arurer. And that Arurer was heavily defended with anti-aircraft. And those 88 millimeter when they got up to your altitude would explode and form a cloud of smoke. And that valley would form almost a solid layer of cloud smoke it was so thick.

Interviewer 3: Were you more scared of German fighters or anti-aircraft fire?

Yoakum: Anti-aircraft fire oh those fighters were something. In fact I heard one boy on the radio almost cussing his buddy out. You get out of here that's mine you know something like that a little language I'd rather not use.

Interviewer 2: Sir within the first few days after D-Day did you have the chance to fly up in that area above the Normandy coast?

Yoakum: Yes

Interviewer 2: What was the picture what did that look like to you on the coast? What was your feeling when you saw all of that?

Yoakum: I didn't fly on the 6th day of June but on the 7th I did. And I believe two missions that we had an assigned area on the map and we flew a circle in it and it was over the invading forces. And those ships and the landing craft on the water was so thick you can't imagine the number of them. But as we were circling we would circle out of sight of them and then come back we'd see them again. And so those were the two times that I flew over that invasion Beach Head. The other two mission I flew that day were escorting the bombers down to bomb an air field and another on we had two 500 pound bombs to intercept German convoy coming up to the Beach Head. And of course we weren't very good with our dropping bombs. And I don't think we hit anything much but we came back with 50 caliber machine guns and we really did a job on the convoy.

Interviewer 2: Now what was the how were you trained to deal with convoys? Were you trained to hit simultaneously to hit the rear and the front of the convoys and then to work on the middle?

Yoakum: No I think the 9th air force may have had that kind of training. We didn't but our flight was just one behind the other and.

Interviewer 2: Now was it difficult for them to get off to the sides of the road was this hedgerow country where their maneuverability was limited or

Yoakum: Yeah the roadway was narrow and they couldn't get off and hide.

Interviewer: Did you target trains?

Yoakum: Oh trains oh yeah that was lots of fun.

Interviewer: I bet it was.

Yoakum: I remember one flight the trains were so easy to see from the air that they quit operating in the daylight hours and they would only operate late afternoon and at night. And we scheduled a mission to go over and be there at daylight and from the look down we saw Cho Cho's everywhere. And I was a flight leader then and I took my flight down and we got six locomotives that day. And on one train after we got the locomotive the flat car it had flat cars on it and the anti-aircraft fire was fierce. And I pulled off to one side and was hesitated about going back and one of my flight members called me on the radio and said, "Hey those oil cars make beautiful fires let's go back." So I was in the lead and I planned my attack on the train to come at him from the rear at about a 45 degree angle and I was in a bank so that I pulled my fire started on the rear of the train and held the concentration of the fire down the train but I

had to do it in a bank. And about the time I was ready to pull up one of the fellows was making an attack from 90 degrees and went rolling over the top of me. And I had to make a split second decision to hesitate that was a close one. But I don't remember saying anything to him later.

Interviewer 2: How many missions would you estimate that you flew in your time between early 44 until the end?

Yoakum: Eighty three missions.

Interviewer 2: Eighty three missions. Never were shot down or

Yoakum: Well no I never got a bullet hole except two 50 calibers. We intercepted we rondavued with the bombers and almost simultaneously met aqua 190s going down through the bombers. And we were on their tail and the gunners on the bombers no doubt were firing at the German planes and were unconcerned where their bullets were going. Anyway some of the stray bullets hit I got two of them.

Interviewer: Friendly fire so to speak.

Yoakum: Friendly fire.

Interviewer 2: It almost seems like it would be almost unavoidable you know once the German aircraft got anywhere near the bombers how was it possible to avoid for the gunners on the bombers how was it possible for them to avoid you guys?

Yoakum: That's true it would have been difficult.

Interviewer 2: Incredible.

Yoakum: And their aircraft identification was not very good either because one time when we had chased a plane deep into Germany and must have chased him five minutes full throttle. And we were real short of fuel when he finally bailed out we didn't shoot him down he just bailed out. And we turned around to head for home and there were some B17s up ahead we pulled up to get close to them for protection. And those belly gunners started firing at us.

Interviewer: Before or since have you ever experienced the kind of adrenaline rush that you experienced when you were flying?

Yoakum: No not since because memory recall doesn't even come close to the reality. The reality of the situation at the time it happened can't be recreated.

Interviewer: I can imagine.

Yoakum: Your memory might remember it but you don't get any adrenaline form memory.

Interviewer: Frankly I think I would have been terrified.

Yoakum: Well everyone was scared.

Interviewer: Living in absolute terror because everything is happening so fast.

Interviewer 2: Actually though did you find that waiting between missions was more nerve racking and worse actually than being in the situation?

Yoakum: No the time that I noticed my nerves was when we come across the anti-coast line and get out over the English Channel we'd start letting down. And we'd get down to 15,000 someone would come over the radio and say it's chesterfield time. And everybody that smoked would light up a cigarette. And I remember my feet being on the rotter petals they would shake as I would begin to unwind.

Interviewer 2: Did you know on a daily basis when you were going to fly? Were your missions pre-planned to that extent so that you know rather than simply waiting for a siren to go off like the British pilot?

Yoakum: Our missions were scheduled.

Interviewer 2: You had scheduled missions so you would know. That probably helped.

Yoakum: Yeah and to tell you the truth anyone who failed to be assigned to fly was disappointed. I worked a bit as assistant group operations every third day and it seemed that every day I was on the ground they had a good show. And I would fly the other two days and didn't see a thing.

Interviewer 2: Did your fighter group ever support any operations around Brisk where the German submarine things were?

Yoakum: No

Interviewer: Did you ever think to yourself I wish I was in the bombers?

Yoakum: No that was rough duty in a bomber. I came back to the states in a C54 with a bomber pilot or co-pilot whatever. And he said he was the only man in his flight that wore his parachute strapped in place. Others wore their harness but they did not have their parachute strapped in place. But he woke up out in midair in his parachute one day and he was the only one that escaped. Apparently the plane exploded and blew him out. The other people might have some of them might have if they'd have had their parachute strapped in place.

Interviewer: Were you based in England the entire time?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer: Okay so you never there was never a base move to France?

Yoakum: No

Interviewer: What did you do in your free time? How did the schedule work did you fly every three days or

Yoakum: We flew I don't remember the schedule of flying but I believe one month I got a hundred hours almost a hundred ninety something hours. And that's a lot of flying for one month. But during the days off we had a bicycle and we'd get out in the country side and ride around on that bicycle. Go to town I got a three day pass and went to London one day and while I was walking down the street one of those B1 buzz bombs that you could hear in the far off distance coming and so I didn't know where the air raid shelters were. So I thought I would just follow the people on the street and they knew where the air raid shelters were. But as the buzz bomb got closer and closer there was no one making any effort to find an air raid shelter and never did. The buzz bomb just finally quit it ran out of fuel and people just kept walking down the street. They got used to it apparently.

Interviewer 4: Did you write a lot of letter?

Yoakum: Pardon

Interviewer 4: Did you write a lot of letters home?

Yoakum: Yes yeah I have a copy of some of this v-mail in here somewhere. You know what v-mail is?

Interviewer: Have we talked about v-mail?

Interviewer 2: No

Yoakum: In order to save space on ships what they would do is they would photocopy your letters into and then put it on micro film and it comes in a particular format. Do you have a copy of the v-mail?

Yoakum: I've got a copy of it somewhere in here.

Interviewer: And then what they would do they would put it on micro film and it would cross the ocean then they would float up at the other end. And it saved on space

Yoakum: Here it is.

Interviewer: Were you married at that time?

Yoakum: No

Interviewer: So you wrote to your family and brother and

Yoakum: My older brother and my younger brother went off before I did. I was the last one to leave home. And I'll tell you a little story about that day I left home. My dad had a pickup truck and he was taking me to Harriman Tennessee for train transportation to Nashville. And I don't remember any emotion when I left home but I'm sure my mother cried when we were gone. And when I boarded the train at Harriman I don't remember any emotion from myself or my dad. But in the 1990s sometime I forget what year it was I was back in East Tennessee where I grew up and there was an old pre Civil War log barn there where my brother had carved his initials in 1929 when I was 8 years old. And I was photographing those carvings the others were 1913 1918 and so on. Any by accident I found a strange carving 26 October 42 and the only significance that could have had to anybody was my dad and me.

And I'm sure he he just had one hand his left arm was missing no doubt he went back home and carved that date while his emotions settled down.

Interviewer: That's amazing.

Yoakum: I photographed it.

Interviewer: That's astonishing it's astonishing that you found it.

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer 2: Just a moment I want to hopefully we can get this on here (holding up a picture of Yoakum).

Interviewer: Have you ever heard of a book called Death in the Family? It was written by a name named James Agee and Lafollette is part of the story.

Yoakum: I know a man by the name of Agee.

Interviewer: And his the family lived in Knoxville and his father, this would have been about 1915, went to visit relatives in Lafollette and had an accident had an automobile accident and died in the automobile accident. And the book is the story of this boy who hears that his father has dies and it's told form the perspective of the child but Lafollette was where it happened. It's a wonderful book. And this guy in fact he won the Pulitzer Prize for this. He was a heavy drinker and he had a pretty messy life and he died when he was fairly young he died in the 1950s. But the book is really good it's really really good.

Yoakum: Another addition to my story there was a one of my graduation class members came to my fighter group in England after I left and was killed in combat. I didn't know it until years later I began to get information about the history of the group.

Interviewer: Does your group have reunions?

Yoakum: Yes we've had several and but now they are few and far between because not many are still living anymore. But yes we had some very good ones.

Interviewer 2: Sire could you I believe I'm getting this right that's the Distinguished Flying Cross?

Yoakum: Yes

Interviewer 2: And the air medal I imagine you received several awards with

Yoakum: I got an air medal with three clusters and a Distinguished Flying Cross with one cluster.

Interviewer 2: What were the circumstances with the award the Distinguished Flying Cross sir?

Yoakum: Just live long enough you'll get one. That's about it.

Interviewer: By the winter of 44 or 45 you could clearly see that the Lofoffal was deteriorating as a force. Is this the time that you went after the remaining the air fields and you know the infrastructure so that the Lofoffal would never be a threat again?

Yoakum: While I was still there and working in group operation every third day the German air force was putting up what they our people called gaggles of 100 to 150 against one group. And my group ran into those gaggles on several occasions. And when I would fly I never did have an opportunity to get in that. But yes they would overwhelm the group with large numbers. But their pilots may have been a little inexperienced.

Interviewer: And a group had what 20 25?

Yoakum: Sixteen per squadron three squadrons.

Interviewer: Okay so 48 close to 50 planes. Did your mission change after allied forces crossed the Rhine into Germany?

Yoakum: We had our intelligence people plotted General Patton's advance with felt blinds on the map indicating his position. And would caution us that this is his last known position he may be far beyond that now be careful. But we didn't give close support to the ground troops the 9th air force did that. But that duty was far worse more hazardous than what we did.

Interviewer: Did you have any responsibilities during Market Garden or Battle of the Bulge?

Yoakum: No I had completed my tour of duty before the Battle of the Bulge. Now the air borne invasion of Holland was going on while I was still there but I wasn't flying. We had some crippled planes coming back from that air drop and landed at our air base.

Interviewer: This is September or October of 44?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer: When did you stop flying?

Yoakum: Well I shortly after VJ Day well in fact I quit I didn't fly any before a short time before VJ Day I was in transit from Dover Delaware to San Francisco and went through Chicago on VJ Day. I was on my way to the Maryann Islands and I was flying a B47 in in a weather observation squadron. We were to fly out over Tokyo and observe the weather conditions and report the cloud formation back to home base so that they could make some determination whether it was feasible to send the B29s out.

Interviewer: When did you leave Europe then?

Yoakum: It was in September and I came back to North Carolina at Goldberg North Carolina and I was an instructor.

Interviewer: In September of 44?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer: And then were you they gave you operational responsibilities after that did they put you back in the cockpit as a fighter again?

Yoakum: At Seamore Johnson Field in Goldberg I was teaching new B47 pilots tactics to be used you know fighter pilot tactics. But it became boring after a while and I volunteered for the first oversea duty available.

Interviewer: Wow

Yoakum: And it was weather observation.

Interviewer 3: Do you remember where you were or what you were doing when you heard the news of VE Day?

Yoakum: No I don't but VJ Day came along when I was going through Chicago. And my orders had me continue going to San Francisco. And when I got to San Francisco I was taking a cab from one station to another and I was giving this cab driver a sad story about hearing VJ Day come along and I have orders to report to the Marianna Islands and I don't have any booze. And he took me down to a the best I remember it was a drug store. And he had something to do with the drug store he took me he went behind the counter and pulled out some black and white scotch and said how many you want? And calculated the space I had in my B4 bag and believe I got about 5 or 6 bottles. And took them with me on down to Salinas California and of course they stopped our movement there. And there I had the job terrible job of getting rid of all of that booze.

Interviewer: Shucks

Yoakum: But I was given the option to stay in the military or get out and I decided to get out thinking they wouldn't need fighter pilots anymore. And I had one bottle left and I headed for home with that one bottle and I was carrying my bag up to the front gate going into the house and I happened to think of that bottle. I better not take it in my mother won't appreciate that. And I took it out and put it in some honeysuckle there beside of the gate and when I went back to get it it wasn't there. She was looking out the window apparently.

Interviewer 3: So what did you do right after the war?

Yoakum: I did lots of things but the first job I had was in Norfolk Virginia and the job title was air craft mechanic making 97 cents an hour. And we were bringing old planes back in for retirement tearing them down and preserving parts for long term storage. And I worked at that job for about 6 months and I wasn't too happy and

Interviewer 3: That had to be an odd transition from flying planes to working on them.

Yoakum: Yeah and so I applied for active duty returned to active duty. And I've got a card somewhere in there to indicate they received my application and that I would be contacted. But I never was contacted and so I was a little restless and in fact I worked in the log woods for a while. My dad had some experience in that and he had bought this piece of timber for me and my younger brother. And his farm wasn't enough to keep us busy you know it was a very small farm. So we went to work in the log woods and then we sold that out and I went to visit my brother out in Wako Texas he was still in the military he

was flying multi engine air crafts. And while I was there he talked me into enrolling in Baylor University. And I've got some copies of missions and all kinds of stuff I'm going to leave with you, you can keep it.

Interviewer 2: I thank you sir. It's obvious just from looking at that book that you had a great great deal of pride in your service to the country that is absolutely obvious. When you separated from the military and you tried to come back when Korea happened were you already doing something else at that time?

Yoakum: Yeah

Interviewer 2: Now what were the circumstances that led you to Clarksville base?

Yoakum: Well I was farming in Hopkinsville and for 10 years we weren't making very much money so my brother and I both got a 40 hour a week job there in the bird cage. And when it closed down in 1965 my dad's farm had sold to the industrial foundation up there then so I got out of farming. And I went to work for a t Fort Campbell as a wage grade ammunition inspector and from there I applied for school ammunition school at Savanna Illinois. And I went two years and graduated from that as a GS 9 journeyman inspector. And those inspectors go all over the world wherever the army has ammunition even Vietnam. If a 105 malfunctioned out on line in Vietnam they sent an ammunition inspector out there on helicopter.

Interviewer 3: Did you ever do something like that?

Yoakum: I didn't go to Vietnam I spent because of my experience in the bird cage wheel I was in Savanna after I graduated I was assigned to Savanna. They had special weapons there and I was assigned to the nuclear sure program so if they had a nuclear accident anywhere we'd put on an air pack and protective clothing and so on and go out and clean it up. But I was on the verge of being sent to Korea on a company tour and I didn't want to go and so I got out of that program and came to Fort Campbell and took a went to a waste raid position. And I retired from Fort Campbell as an ammunition inspector in 1983.

Interviewer 4: How long have you been married?

Yoakum: Well I was married for some 30 years to my first wife she died of cancer in 2002. And I married my second wife it's been about 12 years now.

Interviewer: How did you get the name Little Abner?

Yoakum: I've got a in there I've got a photograph of a man whose name was Pitts Pot his name was Pitts I met a Pitts out in San Francisco at a reunion and I axed him if he was related to that Pitts and he said he was not. But I thought that name was plane.

Interviewer 2: When I first saw the spelling of your name the first thing that flashed through my mind was Al Cap and the comic strip.

Yoakum: I went out to Branson Missouri to a Yoakum reunion a few years ago in 1983 it was and they told me out there that they had people in the area names Wild, Woolley, Ketchum and Yoakum.

Interviewer 2: Now I understand that you have been engaged in conversations with people about your time in Clarksville based that's through the Fort Campbell museum.

Yoakum: Yeah we are planning to set up an appointment with the man I can't remember his name.

Interviewer: John O'Brien possibly?

Yoakum: I'm not sure.

Interviewer: John O'Brien is one of the people.

Yoakum: We have some interesting stories to tell him and one he hasn't heard yet.

Interviewer 2: We would be very very interested in it.

Yoakum: Well alright then. We were working with high explosives one of them was called xylitol it's not quite as sensitive but the other one PVX is sensitive. And so in the area where we worked they put battleship linoleum down on the concrete floor in case we dropped a piece it wouldn't slide across that concrete floor and be set off so to speak. But anyway we had one system that we were retiring and it had PVX it was a huge ball much bigger than but they should have been doing it down there in what was called a cell. It was a structure that had tons and tons of gravel overhead in case you had an accidental explosion all of this gravel would come down and contain the radiation. But they moved this retirement operation up to M bay and they had a big high press as high as this ceiling and put this big ball and the press would come down and compress it so that you could take the clamp band from around the center of this ball and separate it into two hemispheres.

Interviewer 2: Sir did this ball of explosives was it a solid piece or was it made of individual blocks did it have

Yoakum: No it was solid two hemispheres they were solid. And of course they had several detonators around but after the clamp band was removed they had an overhead hoist that would raise this top hemisphere and separate it and exposing the radioactive component that was inside of it. And on this occasion the overhead hoist was lifting that hemisphere and at the same time it malfunctioned and was traveling down the M bay and was going to drag this hemisphere that had been lifted over the metal day press. No double would have dislodged it and it would have fallen on the concrete floor M bay didn't have any battleship linoleum. And so people began to holler and scream and they ran over to a post where a control switch you know safety switch and threw that safety switch to stop the hoist from traveling. And it wouldn't stop and another boy by the name of Pearl he saw he was standing by he was not even part of the work crew he saw what was happening and he ran to the main electrical control box and threw cut the electricity off for the entire bay. And no doubt that saved many lives that day and it would have been plutonium scattered everywhere.

Interviewer 2: Now the outer shell the two hemispheres that went around the plutonium in the center did they have at this time the detonating wires attached to them.

Yoakum: No all of the detonators at that time were removed.

Interviewer 2: All the detonators were removed. Have you ever seen a construction of an atomic bombs? The hardest part of the entire program in figuring out how to get an atomic demolition was in figuring out how to deliver explosive to implode the plutonium to squeeze it down. And it had to be done exactly the switches the wires everything had to deliver at the exact same time had to be a perfect explosion squeezing the ball the plutonium out thus causing the chain reaction. And the means of doing that was developed none other than Prescott Bush.

Yoakum: That was simultaneity

Interviewer 2: Prescott Bush was the one that developed it. George H. W. Bush's father I believe.

Interviewer: Yeah but he was a Senator from North Carolina a Senator from Connecticut too.

Interviewer 2: Maybe it's a different Prescott Bush.

Yoakum: They had another

Interviewer 2: Because he also developed I believe prox fuses too he was a fairly well known in the explosives field.

Yoakum: We had another system there that had called a Setsy only had two detonators and was shaped like a football.

Interviewer 2: Shaped like a football and just had two detonators on either end? Now this was also an atomic monition?

Yoakum: PBX and when we first got that system it was a new system the after the radioactive component was removed there was some concern about internal cracks. If you had cracks in the explosive it would interfere with your simultaneity. So they had to transport it out to x-ray and they did not want to send them separated with the explosive exposed so they planned to put them back together the two halves together and put the clamp down around them. But the problem was I was measuring the equator and they had a positive step above the metal carrier so if you put the two halves back together the raw PBX would be sitting there rubbing together. And the concern was would it be sensitive enough in transit with that positive step to cause a hazard or would it explode. So we had a foreman a production foreman and one of the engineers who came down to the cell where all of the gravel was overhead and they on their own without any anything we had nothing to do with it. They proceeded to put these two halves together put the clamp band around it and one man got on one half with his hands and the other man got on the opposite half with one hand and they twisted it in opposite directions. And Doug Evans was an old explosive expert from Los Alamos was there and Plummer Hodges was telling him about it. And Doug was all ears when he got to the point where they told Doug about when they got to the point where they twisted he stopped and Doug looked up and said, "What did they do that for?" And the man said well they wanted to see if it would go off. Doug said oh my God I'm sure that boy got chewed out.

Interviewer: Wanted to see if it would go off.

Yoakum: It was stupid to begin with. That's why this man was telling Doug Evans about it.

Interviewer 2: Well Mr. Yoakum primarily the weapon systems that Clarksville base dealt with were these the type of strategic weapon systems that were going on the nose cones of air force missals or was this mostly US Army tactical stuff like atomic anti-stuff was it smaller type or did you also deal with the larger hydrogen type?

Yoakum: We retired the big one the one that blew the island off the face of the earth.

Interviewer 2: Is that a bikini?

Yoakum: I forget.

Interviewer 2: What was the largest megaton age of any of the systems you can remember?

Yoakum: That was it that one it weighed about 12 or 14,000 pounds.

Interviewer 2: Approximately 20, 25 megatons?

Yoakum: I don't remember the megatons but that was the largest one we had. It was larger than they needed.

Interviewer 2: Possible a hundred I believe the ones they lost off of Spain in the water were 100 megatons which were one of those was enough to basically take out Germany.

Yoakum: We had one that had been on the nose of a missal somewhere over in Europe and it had been struck by lightning and I believe the triennium was fired off. And they brought it back in for us to dismantle.

Interviewer 2: Now this was it was struck by lightning the triennium had been fired off was it in an unstable condition at that point?

Yoakum: Well of course the triennium had gone into the air and was not a hazard of course it was monitored very well during the disassemble.

Interviewer 2: That one thermonuclear when you have lithium or. The train wreck that you were speaking of before can you go into a little detail of that.

Yoakum: I wasn't connected with that I just heard about it this buddy of mine operated the engine. The engine had the controlled the air breaks and when they backed the engine up to the rail cars that were carrying the weapons you had to connect the air line. And when the airline was connected there was a valve you had to open to let the air go to the railcars. The man who connected to lines he failed to open the valve and the operator of the engine didn't know that. And that's what almost caused the train wreck.

Interviewer 2: And this was carrying?

Yoakum: Well it was scary enough according to this man who was in the museum out there. He said the committee in Washington D.C. heard about it within 24 hours.

Interviewer 2: Now what specialized training I imagine there was a lot of specialized training to work with this stuff. Were you sent to school for this for an extended period of time?

Yoakum: Yeah the mason and hanger sent one man and one automobile in here to take over this contract and started hiring people. And they hired people like me and others off the street who had some mechanical aptitude. And we worked on an old obsolete system that the navy had been working with for some time. But we worked on that thing for the better part of the year I believe it had 90 some odd detonators on it. And you can imagine the maze that you had of routing all of those cables and they had to cross over and under and all that sort of thing.

Interviewer 2: And each one of them had to be exactly within a very high standard each cable had to be exactly the same size because when it was fired off I believe they call cryton switches. They have to deliver with extreme accuracy the electricity to every part of the hemisphere explosive surrounding the component.

Yoakum: We worked for the better part of a year before they decided that we were good enough to do the work that we were supposed to do. And the work they wanted was give assurance to the Department of Defense that these systems would work like they're supposed to without air testing. They called it the Nuclear Assurant I've forgot anyway we brought new weapon systems off the assembly line selected by random selection of serial numbers. And tear it up all the way down and write up any defect deviating from the design specifications and then build it back up again. Some components were destructively tested of course they were replaced with new components. But and we also did modification and repair and retirement.

Interviewer: Why did they close it down in the 60s?

Yoakum: I don't know they were saving money I suppose they had one at Medina Base down in Texas at San Antonio and I think it's closed down too. But less than a hanger was still working at Amarillo what they call Pandex. And I had the option of going out there with them but I chose not to go. A good many people from the Clarksville area did go and retired out there.

Interviewer: I see you bought a silver model do you still have it?

Yoakum: Yeah it's sterling silver.

Interviewer 2: We have approximately five minutes of tape left. Does anybody want to address anything we haven't talked about at this point?

Interviewer: I would ask what was your worst experience as a pilot? Is there one experience that really stands out as rally

Yoakum: Oh yes my most I've got my most memorable is the one on March 20, 1944. We ran into we got into solid overcast at 5,000 feet I moved in close to my flight leader I was the wing man and I could see him and so I didn't have to fly on instruments he did. But as we went up I had no problem but number three and four man behind they became separated apparently they couldn't get close enough to him or something. And then after they became separated from him one of them at least became disoriented and fell out in a spin and didn't have enough altitude under 5,000 feet to recover. And he went into the English Channel and killed himself. But anyway my flight leader and I continued up to

30,000 feet and didn't see the top. So we did a 180 and started a slow gradual decent and at I don't know what our speed was but anyway we came out in the clear at 5,000 feet and we went over a body of water unidentified I don't know what it was to this day. But my flight leader was flying 5,000 feet and looking at his aerial map trying to pin point his location. And we began receiving anti-aircraft fire 88 millimeters and it was so close you could hear the explosion. And it scared me and I called him on the radio and told him I said let's go down to the deck you know at tree top level they can't depress those guns to shoot at you. So he did and we got down there and were flying at about 50 feet and on a previous mission I had turned my gun switch to off and turned it to camera only and had taken some 16 millimeter pictures of the country side beautiful pictures. And so this time I did the same thing I turned my guns off and the camera on only and I was depressing the nose of the plane to bring the objects up closer into the camera. And I remember a truck driving down the country road and other scenes and flying just above the treetops. And all of a sudden a cross country transmission line came into view. And my first impulse and my first reaction was to go over it which was a mistake I should have gone under it. And I hit the wires going up at about a 45 degree angle. And a huge ball of fire or illumination resulted from my contact with those electric wires but I didn't feel any electric shock or force of impact. But as I got up there and my nose began to come back down to level flight I discovered with the stick all the way back I couldn't hold level flight. And I began to lose altitude and I didn't give up hope of regaining control until I got too low to bail out. And then I realized that I was in trouble and I didn't want to go into the ground without somebody knowing what had happened to me. So I called my buddy on the radio and told him that I had hit those wire I cannot maintain straight and level flight and concluded with the ole British expression I think I've had it. I don't know whether you've heard that British expression or not.

Interviewer 2: Yes sir

Yoakum: But anyway there were not many seconds left I don't know how many 30 seconds and something come to my brain not entirely out of my own intelligence that told me there was one additional control that I was not using. And it was a little trim tab on the elevator about this long and about this wide and it's controlled with a crank like the crank on a window of an automobile. I cranked that thing in and I could fly straight and level.

Interviewer: Oh boy

Yoakum: And I got back home with 20 or 25 feet of wire hanging on the plane and it was damaged so bad they didn't repair it they put it in the salvage yard.

Interviewer 2: Amazingly as we're talking about last seconds the last second of this has just about run out here.

Yoakum: We hung the wire up in the ready room and hung a caption on it a hot wire Berlin.

Interviewer 2: Mr. Yoakum thank you so much for showing up here today. Thank you for your service to our country sir.

Interviewer: That's an amazing story. That's really an astonishing story.