

**Mr. Bridges:** ....that's when I went home and got married. I went home and called Mildred and came through Nashville and went on down home and rode the last bus from Nashville to Savannah. I came through Centerville and Hohenwald. I didn't have any idea where Centerville or anybody else was. I thought the bus was going on to Savannah but it didn't. It stopped at Winnsboro. There I was with Mike going home out on the road thumbing. There was an Army personnel that came by and he was going home for his Christmas. He said, "If you can get in Sergeant, well get in." I got in and he carried me to Savannah and then I went on to \_\_\_\_\_ from there. Mildred was working in Nashville so she came down and we decided that we would get married. At that time we didn't have time for everything going on so we went to Corinth, Mississippi, and got married and we were together one week. I went back to camp and she went back to \_\_\_\_\_ and we didn't see each other for two years. I went on boat from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to go across the ocean because the \_\_\_\_\_ crews had put tanks, 500 gallon tanks, inside the belly of the airplane to have enough fuel to go so they couldn't carry the personnel. We all went on a troop ship and the troop ship had 10,000 people on it. It took 14 days to go from there to Liverpool, England. Of course they were zigzagging to miss the U-boats and stuff like that. We were on it 14 days. When we got over there we got back with our outfit. We were in England training for a long time. We were training and of course at that time they were sending these bud bombs over to bomb the mainland. You could hear them and see them. We had a bomb shelter that we got into. That got us up to about England.

Out of curiosity, while you were in England do you remember where you were stationed while you were in England and what the training was like there?

**Mr. Bridges:** We were at one place, I believe it was Totten, England, but I can't recall. The bases that we had as far as security reasons didn't have the name of the town. They had numbers. Strip 8431 or something like that. The first one were at was close to Nottingham, England. That is in the middle part of England. We moved two or three different places there. We left in southern England for D-Day.

For D-Day were you all stationed out of Dover?

**Mr. Bridges:** We had moved from that down to the southern part. I can't remember, Totten I believe it was. There was Totten England and there was Totten, Massachusetts. I believe it was down there. It was closer to the gulf so we could go out and go around. We didn't go straight across. We went down the gulf and came back the back side on D-Day. There were hundreds of our type that was carrying paratroopers and of course that was the day you could have walked from England to what looked like France on boats; there were so many in the channel. That was when the whole thing broke loose.

So you got to see all of that with all the boats?

**Mr. Bridges:** Yeah we got to see part of it. We didn't care about seeing much of it. We were just wanting to hurry up and get out. In jumping our troops, the Air Force troop carriers were different. Other planes had guns and bombs on them. We didn't have anything except a 45 pistol. Each crew member had that. Of course each one of the paratroopers, we carried 18 paratroopers. They all had their guns and had everything they had on their pack. They had their own packs of 100 pounds or more apiece. They were the ones that you felt sorry for because they were jumping behind the enemy lines. Everything they had in the world was on their back and they knew they were surrounded by people. We knew that if we didn't get shot down that we were going to be back home. They knew they were going to be there until they fought their way out of it.

Being the engineer and being the crew chief in a situation like D-Day what exactly was you doing? Were you just watching gauges and making sure that everything was working properly?

**Mr. Bridges:** We were going in right behind the other and they had a dome light on there. We could stand up and see in the dome light and see if the one behind us was doing like they ought to. When we got ready to jump the troopers, the lead one would flash a red light for 5 seconds was drop zone time. That would go all the way back. When we would get to here we would drop and things like that. When they were loading those paratroopers were needing some help to load. They had what they called a static line down the middle that they hitched their parachute to. We had to be sure and instruct them that each one of them done his own. I didn't do yours and you didn't do mine because I could leave yours off and your chute wouldn't open when you went out the door. It had a metal wire down the middle top of the plane and we were to get all of them to hitch up. We had two back doors off of the airplane and it was wide enough that you could put a jeep in. They would start from the back and they would have somebody there at the back. We were at the back and they would push out something. It was probably ammunitions or supplies or something. They would all jump out and we were to be at the back coming down the airplane with those shoes on and all with the metal floor. We were slipping and falling as we were headed to the door to get them out. When they got out each one of them had a line that had a thing on their parachute that pulled it to open and we had the cord coming out the door. We had to pull all those cords back in after they got out. Then we headed home.

After you got them to jump your job was done; it was time to go get out of there. Did you just make the one trip?

**Mr. Bridges:** No, we made several. Our outfit left England and went to Italy. I wasn't with that. We were experimenting then with an airplane flying down and picking up a glider in flight because we figured that they were going to have some wounded people there that we had to get out. I was training on that plane when the other guys went to southern France. They had the invasion of southern France. I remember that I was there. During the week all the time we would be hauling gasoline, or we would be hauling supplies, or we would be hauling ammunition from the gulf where they got off the boats at up in to France, Germany, all the way up. One day say we would land here in Centerville with gasoline, we would carry 125 5-gallon cans of gasoline in an airplane and we would leave that off here. Patton of course was going through with the tanks and they were needing the gas. We would leave that here and then we would go back and get another load and tomorrow we would land at Wrigley or somewhere. If we didn't have air places to land we would land in fields. We didn't have to have that for that type of airplane. We didn't have to have that much runway. But we hauled that. Of course after the war was going we would go to the hospitals and pick up the wounded and carry them back to the hospitals there. The airplane could hold 18 paratroopers and then we could haul all those 125 cans of gasoline by folding the seats down. Then we could put the stretchers in there and haul 18 litter patients back to the hospital from just the field hospital.

So you all were really the....?

**Mr. Bridges:** It was the transportation part of the thing there. All of our flying was low. When we were going across the English Channel we went low because we didn't want the radar to pick us up. When we would get to where we were going to jump we were still too low for the parachute to open so we would have to go up to five or six or 700 feet. That is where we would raise up to for them to jump and then we would come back down to as close as we could because we didn't have any armor or anything on the airplane.

So you all had the riskiest job than one of the ....?

**Mr. Bridges:** Well, it was. Of course there were the guys that flew the bombers and all and they had the flaks shoot at them and of course we had the flak. You could see these guns coming up from the ground and you knew that it wasn't Christmas or something like that. They were shooting at you.

You all were definitely appreciated because you got everything where it needed to be.

**Mr. Bridges:** Well we tried to. It was a great experience for me and a lot of it helped me on through life, the discipline and things like that that most young boys.....I wasn't no bad boy. I was just growing up. My mom and dad tried to take the discipline I look back would have helped a lot of boys as I look back. We don't want them to go to war but just the discipline would help a lot of us.

Were you promoted during your service time?

**Mr. Bridges:** Yes, when I left \_\_\_\_ to go to school I made Private First Class. When I left the school there to go to the school in California, Douglas Aircraft, I made Corporal. When I came back from that and got into the outfit I made assistant engineer and we were in Laurinburg Maxton, North Carolina, for training to go overseas and I made Sergeant. I stayed Sergeant until after I got overseas. When we went over there we had about 18 planes per squadron. That is just roughly. When we got over there we had 32 planes per squadron. So then I made engineer. When I made engineer I was ready for another stripe. I got Staff Sergeant. In about two months I made Technical Sergeant. So that was the rating I had. A Tech Sergeant was as high as an enlisted personnel could be in flight. Officers were from Lieutenant up for the pilots and all like that. For us, the radio operator and engineer, the radio operator as far as he could go was Staff Sergeant but the engineer could go to Tech Sergeant. So I made Tech Sergeant and then got discharged. The biggest thing with that was the pay. After you were permanently flying you got base half base pay for flying because of hazardous duty. I didn't realize that at that time. Of course it always comes in handy.

When you had free time, and I don't imagine there was much of it with hopping back and forth, but when you had free time what did you do?

**Mr. Bridges:** Well there was a guy from Nashville and he and I were together for a long time. He was an engineer too. A lot of times at night a lot of them wanted to go out but if you worked pretty hard you didn't care very much about that. When we were in France we were flying all these people back and forth from the front lines and all. If you would fly awhile you would get a week's leave in England. They would take a load of us from our squadron and fly us to England and we would go over there to London. They had a Red Cross there if you needed to spend the night. We would go around there and look that over. He and I being together if you were by yourself you wouldn't do it probably. We went over there two or three times. One time we went over and it was rough going over with winds and all. Our squadron plane carried a group over, it was about 30. We got off in England. The ones that were over there, we do it every week, there would be a crowd over there coming back and there would be some of us going over. When we went over and landed, we saw the other group that was there with our outfit that was going back to base. Hunt and I had made a lot of films. Some of them were illegal and everything else but we were making them to have to come home. We had about 15-20 rolls each. A guy from Chattanooga, who was an engineer like we were; we told him when he went over there to carry these over there and have them developed. When we went over we saw him, he was getting on the plane and we was getting off. He said, "I got your film." I said, "Well just carry them on back to the base and we will pick them up when we come home." That plane left and about 15 minutes after it left it hit the mountainside going back to England. It killed everybody only but four. Our film was gone but that was beside the point. There were three that came back to the squadron that was burned and beat up and all. It crashed into the mountainside out there. Going back evidently was bad weather. You couldn't see. That happened the same day that Glenn Miller's plane went down crossing the English Channel. When we was over in France we would go to Paris and they had USO shows and Glenn Miller was one of them there. We were there one night and he was there. But he was going to places like that. When he was going back across the channel they didn't hear no more from him. We never did hear anything that happened. We went back and forwards like that.

Hunt and I went together some when we were in Paris of looking at places like that. It was enlightening; of course, a country boy had never seen anything like that before.

So you all got to trance around some very big cities?

**Mr. Bridges:** We did.

That sounds like a good way to spend some free time.

**Mr. Bridges:** It was. It was relaxing to get away. Most of the time you either had to work on your plane that needed to be done or something like that. At Christmas time everybody that has ever heard about the Army heard about the Battle of the Bulge. We were in France and they called us up. It was about 12 or 14 inches of snow on the ground. We had power racks they called them that went on the belly of the ship that you didn't have to have nobody in there or anything. We would release them from there and we could carry ammunition and medical supplies and all. They were surrounded and we flew that night, I didn't fly on that mission because we had to go out there and put those power racks on there and our assistants, we all had assistants, didn't know how to do that. So we got out there and they were being briefed to go. While they were going we were all back at the base and my airplane, my assistant, went on that flight. That plane, I don't know whether it was shot down but it was something but it hit the trees. The pilot, copilot and Sharnski, my engineer, I don't remember about the radio, but I remember him, he was on it. He hadn't been over there long, he was my assistant and he was from Youngstown, Ohio; he was crewing the plane that afternoon. That next morning, the night after it happened we were waiting on the planes to come back and well the one that I was engineer on didn't come back. There were several in the group. When we were flying the 92<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, we would fly with the 91<sup>st</sup>, the 92<sup>nd</sup>, 93<sup>rd</sup>, and 94<sup>th</sup> Squadron. They made up one group, the 439<sup>th</sup> Group. So we would all fly about the same mission. The next morning I was going down to eat. Our chow house was in an old hangar. I heard a guy hollering, "Sergeant Bridges!" It was this dude; he had been shot down way up there by the bulge. He had come back that night all the way back to the squadron. The next morning when I was going to eat breakfast he was coming down the runway out there hollering. He said that he everything that was coming back this way he would flag it. Of course the Army trucks knows him and he made it back that night The pilot and copilot didn't come back for two or three weeks. They stayed up there in that area somewhere, but Sharnski came back. Soon after that we got a new plane and started all over again. The last one that we made was across the Rheine River and we lost more airplanes in the group. This is a book there of the thing. It was the airborne that I was in. We had all of our planes, it's in there, and there were hundreds and hundreds of planes going over. We were pulling two tow gliders. We were pulling the gliders either had ammunition soldiers or something in but we pulled two of them. My plane didn't get even a bullet hole but the one in front and the one behind were shot down. They had learned, the Germans, these old planes that we had, was hard to knock down unless you just hit her in a good place and they were durable. They got to where they were shooting at one coming over and they would go back and get the next one. There on the last they picked this one up way back behind and would shoot it all the way across and they would skip one. I happened to be one of those that was skipped. Every other one they was hitting them. We had more planes shot down that day of the whole Air Force that we had than any other day. Of course they were backed up. You back a fellow up to much and try to run him out he is going to put up a fight and that is what they did. That was the last mission that we had.

Were you impressed with the qualities of your enemies at all? Was there anything about them that really made an impression on you, good or bad?

**Mr. Bridges:** Well we weren't with them very much because we would go in and then we would be back at our base at night. Somebody like the ground troops, they were with them day in and day out. I really don't remember too much of the character of them because really you didn't see them out where we were.

You said that you weren't injured?

**Mr. Bridges:** No, not a scratch.

You had your fair share of hauling injured people.

**Mr. Bridges:** Yes, and too another thing talking about hauling injured people, when the war was over and they was going back and they were getting those prisoners out of the place where they kept the American prisoners and all.

Concentration camps.

**Mr. Bridges:** Concentration camps, that was part of our job. We had to go up there and haul those people out. We would go up there and load them up and you would have to help them get onto the plane. They were so weak. The guy would show you a picture of him and he was about a 200 pound brute at first but he weighed about 80 or 90 pounds. He was just starved to death. They would all be covered in lice and everything else. When they would get on the plane we would carry them back and they would be sick of flying because they just didn't have enough to eat. When we would get back to the area they would take our clothes and they had a thing kind of like a crop duster that they would put down your shirt and you would undo your trousers and they would blow all this DDT and stuff down on you to keep you from getting the lice and stuff like that or other things that they had and then we would go in and take a shower. They would burn your clothes and then give us some more because we would do that some more. We would do this day in and day out. That was one of the most horrific sights you had ever seen was that many people had been starved to death.

You had a big hand in getting them out of there.

**Mr. Bridges:** Well we did and the thing about it is, you look back and I sometimes wonder why and somebody may have, that you didn't make just a little daily diary or something. You didn't know if you were going to come back to read it or know what was going to happen because maybe you were tired when you got in and you just went to bed or I don't know what. I look back now and there are a lot of things that I wished I had a detailed in writing. I guess some did but I don't remember too many that did. I'm sure some of them did.

I'm sure some of them did. Those would be valuable.

**Mr. Bridges:** It would be. I read the book that Tom Brokaw wrote *The Greatest Generation*. After I read that, to me that suited the type of person that he was talking about in that, he could have been writing that for me. I was a guy out of high school, a farm boy and I had never been to town too much or a big town anyhow and then getting married. Mildred was working at \_\_\_\_\_ Aircraft Factory. The whole thing up to a point could have been about our lives. That was the reason I enjoyed it so much. It was fitting for us. Somebody gave it to me and I can't remember now who it was. It was one of the better books because it could apply to me at that time.

You did such a good interview but before we stop what is your best memory from being in the service or coming home right afterward, what is your best memory?

**Mr. Bridges:** I guess getting home to my wife and family would be the main thing because that is what we were all looking for. She met me in Nashville and we rode the bus through Centerville and we went on down home. We stayed around there until sometime between February and March. I got to say this and to

you it doesn't matter on this when we came through Centerville Mac and Mable was down to buy the funeral home. We went through the old station over there where the bus went through the building on the corner and we rode on down through Savannah and got on home. We got down there and of course my mom and dad, my brother had got in four days before I did, he and his wife was at home and my younger sister was at home, my other sister lived there close. When we got there the old house, the big old house, well there mother, daddy, my sister, me, Mildred, my brother and his wife all living at the same place. That was just unheard of. Of course dad still had some corn in the field and stuff like that. He couldn't get it out and my sisters went to the field and pulled corn just like a man while we were gone. We was helping that out. When we would come through Centerville it was a rainy bad day. I told Mildred when we were going down the road and Mac and Mable talked about buying the funeral home I said, "Why in the world are they buying it at Centerville?" I can remember the old Magnolia tree that used to stand down there by the funeral home. I remember seeing all that. It just didn't look too good. We went on down home and we helped there on the farm until I guess it was about February or March and Mac and Mable had asked us to come up here and visit them. We came up here and he didn't have any help. They bought the funeral home and didn't have any help. Like I said, I couldn't figure out why they would want to buy a funeral home in a place like Centerville. We came back to visit and Mac asked me, "Well what are you going to do?" My dad's farm wasn't big enough for me and my brother both to farm. So I said, "Well he is old he has been gone longer than I have." He and I talked it over and I said, "Well you can take over the farm and I will get into something else." So that is the way that it happened. We came up here to visit and when we came up here to visit Mac said, "Well what are you going to do?" I said, "I don't know I will get into something." He said, "Well I don't have any help here. You can come in and work here." I said, "Well I don't know about that." But anyhow to make a long story short we got back and got dressed for new clothes and we have been here ever since. I told them at a veterans meeting that we had a year before last, I didn't make this last one that the Church of Christ has, I got over there and I told them about the story of me going to Centerville. They said, "Why in the world would Mac and Mable want to buy a funeral home for?" I said, "Mildred and I have been living here for 50 years." I said, "The thing about it is, you always thought you would be going back home." We did, we thought we were going back home. When we got ready to build a house here we decided then that our friends and all was here over at the long haul. Our parents were still living and all down there but we didn't know anybody down there and we thought we would stay here. So I told them that Mildred and I had left a lot down there that we were going to build a house on. After my brother quit farming Mildred and I bought the farm. We were going to go back and retire. We decided that we still had about 12-15 acres of the farm. We could sell it and buy a cemetery lot out at Macs place and make it permanent. That is what we did. That will be the way that it had happened. I came here to work at the funeral home. I started studying and I got my embalmers license. I got my funeral directors license and I worked there 22 years. A lot of people say, "Why do you want to do that?" You didn't like for the people that you was dealing with to have the grief that they had. But you could do something to help them that made you feel good. That was the key to the whole thing. You treating people like if you were on the other side that you would like to be treated. I tried to do that. I did a pretty good job of it for 22 years. After that I could see that the retirement service was getting pretty high and I was getting older. So I bought half of the \_\_\_\_\_ Insurance Agency. I kept that I believe it was 16 years or something like that. I sold it and we have been retired about 12 or 14 years and we have enjoyed every bit of it; except a few weeks ago with that operation. We've enjoyed it and we have done kind of what we wanted to. We have been fortunate that we could retire before we got too old and we could enjoy our retirement. I think that if anybody ever has enjoyed the retirement that Mildred and I have.

I don't doubt it as long as I have known you.

**Mr. Bridges:** People here are different from anywhere in the world because like I said when I was bad mouthing them about not wanting to be there and now I come back and feel like I do now, you have a big turnaround. It's a fact, there is just not places like this. I have realized, I have always been out here

working and gardening and on the hillside and doing as I please. After the surgery it's made a big difference and the people have made it so good that you would never want to live anywhere else.

I know how that goes. I have done my share of bad mouthing this tiny little town. But I would like to be able to come back to it.

**Mr. Bridges:** It's really something. We just hope that we can have a few more years here and enjoy it because we have been fortunate health wise, financially wise, and it all. We couldn't have asked for a whole lot to have been different.

Well thank you so much for doing this interview.

**Mr. Bridges:** I appreciate it and I know some of it is kind of mixed up a little bit. I know I am not as sharp with my thinking and all as I was a month ago because this has made a difference in me. I feel so fortunate because Dr. Zac pushed me on a little bit. Otherwise I might have been out here on the hill and had a fatal heart attack. But as it was, they found it; they corrected it and they say that I will be better than ever when it is over with. That is what I am looking forward to.