# Interview with James E. Smith

# VR2-V-L-2007-026.01

Interview #1: November 2, 2007

Interviewer: Mark DePue



DePue: Hello. Today is Friday, the 2nd of November 2, 2007. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today it's my honor to interview James E. Smith—Jim Smith—who is a B-17 pilot during the Second World War and saw considerable action. He completed twenty-five missions in the European theater with the Eighth Air Force. So, Jim, I'll start with our standard question. When and where were you born?

Smith: I was born in Lockport Township, Illinois, and the house was on Route 30. It was about six miles west of Joliet.

DePue: Okay. And what was your father doing for a living?

Smith: My father was an electrician for the power company at that time.

DePue: I don't think you told us the date you were born.

Smith: Oh, I was born on June 7, 1919.

DePue: Okay. So by the time you're growing up and you start having a memory, do you remember the stock market crash at all?

Smith: The stock market crashed in 1929 and I do remember that. There were people jumping out of the windows on Wall Street. It was a terrible thing.

DePue: How did that affect your father? Because it certainly caused an incredible depression for many years afterwards.

Smith: It affected my father in the following ways: his work week was cut down about two days a week, and during that time, we painted his house and worked on the shrubbery around the house in Chicago Heights. He had a lot of time at home to do things that he wanted to do. Frankly, we did not suffer too badly in the Big Depression. During this time, he caught up with a lot of extra jobs that he had planned to do.

DePue: But money, I assume, was tight?

Smith: It was tight, and we were very careful with our expenditures.

DePue: I assume you graduated from high school?

Smith: I did.

DePue: In what year?

Smith: I graduated from high school in 1934.

DePue: And you said you were born when?

Smith: 1919.

DePue: So maybe a couple years later than that.

Smith: Maybe 1937.

DePue: Okay. What did you do after graduation, then?

Smith: After graduation from high school, I went to Thornton Junior College in Harvey, Illinois.

DePue: And you completed how many years there?

Smith: Two years of pre-engineering.

DePue: What was your intention when you went to college?

Smith: My intention was to learn a trade of some kind and improve my ability to make money, which is an honorable...

DePue: (laughter) An honorable thing to do. But you didn't have any specific career goals in mind?

Smith: No, I really did not.

DePue: So that takes us up to about 1939. Were you paying attention to the news and especially what was going on in Europe and in Japan?

Smith: Oh yes. All the papers printed it. It was a major event, all of these things with the Japanese invading Manchuria and China and other places. I think that we realized that this was a very bad situation that was going to affect all of us, eventually.

DePue: And you, being a very young man, it has obvious implications on how it might personally affect you.

Smith: And it did.

DePue: Let's move on with that. After 1939, then, what did you do for the next couple years?

Smith: Well, for several years, I worked for United Airlines. I was sent out to Cheyenne, Wyoming and lived out there while I worked. During the course of the events, I had an opportunity to go to a class where they were teaching the fundamentals of air travel and flying. The United States government was starting a civilian pilots training program. I took the course and I was one of the ten graduates of the course that was given flying lessons. I flew small planes and got a pilot's license.

DePue: Where these bi-planes, by chance?

Smith: No, they were monoplanes. They were all-aluminum Luscombe. It was a brand of aircraft.

DePue: Now, obviously, the government at that time isn't just doing this out of benevolence. They had a reason why they wanted a civilian pilot base.

Smith: Yes. I came to realize that. (laughter)

DePue: But at the time that you were taking the courses, you weren't thinking along those lines?

Smith: No. No, I was thinking about finishing a course with the best grade possible.

DePue: That's very honorable. I know you were drafted in June of 1941. How did that come about?

Smith: How did that come about? Well, I was drafted out of Chicago Heights, Illinois and that came about because I was of the proper age and fit enough to be drafted.

DePue: Yeah. I don't know that many people realize, though, that we had the draft even before Pearl Harbor.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: And what did you end up doing once you got drafted?

Smith: I wound up in the field artillery and one of the things that I did was radio training: Morse code, and cranking the generators that powered the transmitters. They had two cranks on them and it was (laughter)... While the transmission was in progress, the receivers worked on batteries, but the transmitters worked on those cranked generators and that was quite a chore.

DePue: You know one of the things that struck me in talking to you earlier—one of the first assignments you got after basic training –you were assigned to a mule pack outfit?

Smith: Yes. We were standing in line in formation one morning and...

DePue: I guess we didn't mention, this is at Fort Sill at the field artillery school.

Smith: Yes, at the field artillery school. After being drafted, they sent us to Fort Sill. Fort Sill was the artillery center for the United States and they assigned us to the different batteries in the organization. As a result, I wound up in one of the heavy artillery batteries carrying the ninety pound projectile to put into the muzzle of the gun. Of course they would put the powder bags—it was bagged in those days—into the breach and close the breach and pull the lever, pull the string, that set off the cartridges that started the whole thing going, and you held your ears...

DePue: This was the 155-millimeter Howitzer?

Smith: 155-millimeter Howitzer.

DePue: Which is no small piece of equipment.

Smith: Nooooo, sir. And one of the things that happened was that they took a bunch of us and put us in truck training also driving these prime movers. Of course the prime movers that they had, had airbrakes and we civilians were used to hydraulic brakes. We would step on brakes like hydraulic brakes when we were in the driver seats for training; all of the other recruits in the back would be pushed forward because the brakes would eventually bring the thing to a halt but it was an abrupt halt. It took a lot of training to get us to operate those air brakes properly.

DePue: I bet that made you very popular with the guys riding in the back.

Smith: Oh, when our turns came to drive, there was a lot of moaning. (laughter) Yes.

DePue: So does that mean that your time with this mule pack outfit was rather short lived?

Smith: The mule pack outfit came after the truck training. We were standing in line one morning and the sergeant called a bunch of names and said, "Pack your things;, you're going to another part of the organization." So we went to the barracks—pyramidal tent barracks they were those days—and packed our belongings and they moved us over to another part of this Fort Sill camp.

Come to find out, it was a mule pack outfit that was being formed. They had not received the mules yet. We marched for a day or two and we were anticipating these mules. Well, a couple of us were pretty small people. They had a bunch of big, husky farm boys: six foot two, three, four, weighing 200 pounds, 250 pounds. Here we were in this outfit, and I weighed about 125 pounds in those days. I was about five foot six, five foot seven. We were midgets compared to some of these guys The first sergeant was calling a roll and he looked at us in this morning assembly at reveille. He **stopped** calling the roll and he said, "What's your name? What's your name? What's your name? Go pack your things?" And they got us out of the mule pack!

DePue: Which is a good thing, because you didn't have a lot of experience working with farm animals, did you?

Smith: No way! And I wanted nothing to do with mules, especially.

DePue: I think I had heard someplace, or you mentioned, that one of the reasons that you might have been selected for other duties is because you knew how to type a little bit.

Smith: Yes. We got into another organization from the mule pack outfit. The man that typed got ill and the captain, who is a commissioned officer, went up and down the organization one morning and said, "Can you type? Can you type? Can you type?" And I, having had typing in high school, said, "Yes, I can type." So I got a job in the orderly room, typing up the orders for transfers, for pay—everything had to be typed as it was done. There's no short-hand, no long-hand work done and it had to be typed and in duplicate and in triplicate for the army records. You typed up the pay every month, the payroll. They called them out and handed out the checks and the money. Money. It was money they handed out in those days. Everything had to be just done perfectly. No retyping, no nothing.

DePue: I know the payroll officers always sweated that out to make sure the sums, the figures added up right at the end of the day.

Smith: Right. And it was quite a chore to type things and get them properly printed.

DePue: We've been talking a lot about the military and probably people who are listening to this are saying, "What about being a B-17 pilot?" So how did you end up getting to the Army Air Corps? Maybe it was already the Army Air Force at the time.

Smith: I was assigned after the training at Fort Sill to Headquarters Battery of the First Field Artillery. The Air Force was apparently being built up, and they circulated the word that anyone that would want to join the Air Force, there was a bonus if you were accepted. Well, I'd had the pilot's training; I had a radio license when I went into the service where I could adjust transmitters—they just don't let anybody adjust the transmitters. And I had...

DePue: I know you had a couple years of college, which probably helped.

Smith: Two years of college. Oh, that was one of the requirements in those days. So I applied and I was accepted. They sent me home on furlough for thirty days. So I was glad to go home. About twenty-five days into the furlough, I received a telegram at home. I had trouble reading it because it was in Army language. I finally figured it out that this was a continuation of my furlough and I was to come back in an additional thirty days. So I took my time at home, had sixty days of furlough. I went back to the organization and they gave me a train ticket to the West Coast Training Command. I went to the reception center outside of Los Angeles and got into the Air Force that way.

DePue: What time in this whole training period did Pearl Harbor happen? Was that while you were on leave?

Smith: I think that was while I was on leave.

DePue: You certainly remember that day. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about that.

Smith: No, it did not happen when I was on leave. I was back in the field artillery at...

DePue: Were you at Fort Sill then?

Smith: No I wasn't at Fort Sill; I was outside of St. Louis in the Army base in Missouri.

DePue: Fort Leonard Wood?

Smith: Fort Leonard Wood. That day, we were escorting college students that came to visit the post. We were called in and we were told that the attack on Pearl Harbor had happened and that we were to ask our visitors if they minded leaving. Because of that, we didn't know exactly what would happen and we were told to ask them to very quietly leave because of the situation that had developed. We asked these young ladies and young men that were visiting the post from the School of Mines in Missouri to leave. From that point on, we were on war-basis footing.

DePue: What were your thoughts when you heard that news? Because you're fairly new in the military. I mean this has some implications for you.

Smith: The first thing that happened: we got a whole bunch of rifles that were in Cosmoline, [a generic rust preventive] Cosmolene comes off with detergents and gasoline. So we had kerosene, gasoline, and all of these rifles to clean, out of these buckets of Cosmolene. This was the first indication that we were going to be in deep trouble. So we did clean them and we went on the alert.

The patrols at night were armed with live ammunition as we went on patrol duty. It was a total surprise to us that we had been attacked. Up to a point, we knew the Navy was shadowing some military forces out of Japan. They knew that was happening and we knew that they had been shadowing these forces, but I don't think they knew that they were going to attack Pearl Harbor.

DePue: Shortly after that, of course, the Germans declare war on the United States and this is about the time, now, you end up in the Army Air Force. I'm thinking that, okay, being in the 5th Artillery is dangerous enough –but if you're volunteering to go in the Army Air Force and you want to be a pilot—were you thinking that this is a very dangerous thing or did you see this as an adventure? Or how did you look at that decision?

Smith: I realized it was something that was going to be necessary and that I would have to accept the fate that might be dealt to me. I took this as a challenge. I'm going to fly. I'll fly my best. I'll do a good job and we'll get through it on faith alone, probably.

DePue: What were your parents' reactions?

Smith: My mother was a widow at that time and she was dreading my going into the Air Force. But I had this prior training and I said, "Well, if I make it, I make it, and if I don't, I don't." It was a fatalistic attitude, I believe, but I thought, I'm going to do my best.

DePue: Did you have any other brothers and sisters?

Smith: I had another brother who was still in high school and this other brother decided that after high school—and he did graduate—he would go to the Navy, and he enlisted in the Navy.

DePue: But certainly your mother wasn't alone in worrying about a couple sons being in the service.

Smith: She was alone and she did worry.

DePue: Talk a little bit about the kind of training you received then, once you started in the flight school.

Smith: In flight school, first assignment was primary training and it was very much similar to the flight training that I'd had in Cheyenne, Wyoming at the school there where I flew. But it was in heavier equipment. These were single-[radial]-engine bi-planes, Stearman. They were heavily stressed;we could do stunts in them after we got used to them and they would hold together. They were marvelous airplanes to fly, actually.

From there, we went to basic training. In the basic training, we had the BT-13s and BT-15s, the difference between them being the engine type. In the other plane, there was no flaps, no controllable propellers or anything like that, and in the basic training, we had flaps that we had to lower and raise as we flew and, also, two-speed propellers. You had a high speed and a low speed. You did not have the [landing] gears that you raised and lowered. The gear was a fixed gear and they were a little tricky to fly...

DePue: Now being a BT, does that mean this is a bomber trainer?

Smith: No, it's basic trainer.

DePue: Okay.

Smith: The first one was a PT; that's primary trainer. The second plane was a different type of plane. It was a bi-plane with a fixed propeller—metal propeller in this case—and it was a B with the flaps and the two-speed propeller.

DePue: Now if somebody had walked up to you at this time and said, "Jim, what kind of an aircraft do you think you'd like to fly once you're done with all this training?"

What would you have said?

Smith: I would have liked to have flown a P-51.

DePue: A fighter?

Smith: A fighter.

DePue: But nobody asked you that at this time, did they?

Smith: Yes they did. They asked me when we got out of advanced trainers and I graduated from Luke Field with AT-6s, which were fairly advanced. In fact, the Norwegian government put a heavier engine in them and flew them as fighters. They were very good equipment as an advanced trainer. I would have chosen P-51s if I was able to. Although the P-38 was a good aircraft. Very, very maneuverable. Very fast. Very agile. I would have flown one of those but I did not have the chance.

When I got out of advanced training, they wrote orders for us to get on a train –which we did –and go to Los Angeles and from Los Angeles up into Washington State.

DePue: Do you remember roughly when you completed the advanced flight school?

Smith: Yes, April 12 of 1943. That was class 43-D like dog.

DePue: So you were in flight training for well over a year.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: And when in this whole process did you get commissioned?

Smith: I got commissioned on April 12, 1943, the day we graduated from advanced training.

DePue: And then you got a pay raise at the same time?

Smith: Yes we did! (laughter) Yes!

DePue: Did you have a girlfriend during any of this time?

Smith: Well, we'd seen girls. I can't say that we had any that we were really interested in, but you know, the uniform looks good to these young ladies.

DePue: But would it be correct to say that there was no one who was really worrying about you?

Smith: That's right.

DePue: Okay. So you graduated from the advanced flight school. You go up to—where did

you say—at that time?

Smith: Moses Lake, I believe it was, in Washington State.

DePue: And you started training at what, then?

Smith: Started training on B-17s. [heavy bomber, known as the Flying Fortress]

DePue: Now you'd already professed a desire to go to the P-51s, so B-17s—quite a bit different kind of a machine.

Smith: Yes. I did not like them to begin with. Oh, they were slow, I thought. But after flying them, they were great aircraft.

DePue: Now did you start with the training in that respect as a co-pilot or a pilot? Or did it not make much difference?

Smith: It started as a co-pilot. I had a pilot that had been through what they called "the bases." You went from several of these bases in Washington State flying these B-17s and they gave you different problems in different parts of the operation of the West Coast training command. I wound up, I think, in Moses Lake to begin with, and then I flew as a co-pilot. We went through, I think, sixty hours of training and I got down to Walla Walla, Washington, where we kicked off. They did some more training there and after flying a few times in Walla Walla, I was told to report to the commandant's office. I reported and they said, "You are taken off of this crew and you're to go back to Efreda(?), Washington as a first pilot for training there."

So I'd been through training as a co-pilot and then I went back to another air base up in Washington State for training as a first pilot. I picked up the basic members of my crew and we started through going back through the phases. I picked up a co-pilot that was also in training and I was the first pilot he became a trainee as a co-pilot for. He wound up as a first pilot later on. It was a continual operation: co-pilot to pilot and overseas. That's what it amounted to.

DePue: I'm assuming at this point in your career and in this point in the process of training, this is very much a team effort by this time. So it's not just mixing and matching, but it's a pilot, the co-pilot, the navigator, and the bombardier and the rest of the crew and part of the whole deal is you're training to work as a team. Is that correct?

Smith: That is correct. I think one of the first instances we had that demonstrated we had to be a team was the fact that the ball turret gunner was not on the interphones, which was the communication system throughout the airplane so that anyone could hit the mic button and say, "There's a plane on our left," and everyone heard it. "There's a plane below us." Everyone heard it.

So we were going in for landing and the ball turret gunner was not on the intercom. The ball turret [a plexiglas upside-down dome under the planes belly with two machine guns] was not fully stowed for landing, and when we landed, the

ends of the gun barrels would round off on the runway. (laughter) Must have been a trail of sparks a mile long. We had a pilot that was training us onboard. There were reports written on that incident until the paper was (laughter) a blizzard. It was about an inch thick. (laughter)

DePue: To see if someone was at fault or if somebody was going to pay for those machine guns?

Smith: Pay for those machine guns. Well, eventually it happened that they just wrote them off, thank goodness. Because they were about $300-400 apiece damage to them. It brought home to us that we all had to know what the other man was doing on this crew, so that if something happened in the tail, the pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator—everybody knew what has happening. I think that saved our lives several times, because we knew what the other man was doing, what the situation was. In fact, I lined them up on the runway after this and talked to the skeleton crew that I was assembling and told them, "Men, we've got to be on that interphone. You get in that plane, you put your headphones on, your microphone on, and check in. If you're not checked in, we don't go."

DePue: That's the bottom line.

Smith: Bottom line. And believe me, it paid off. Because from then on, I knew what was happening back there. They knew what we were going to do from up front.

DePue: Talk to me a little bit about this. You had a couple problems on your crew—at least one incident, I know—other than this one. Are you willing to talk about that?

Smith: Oh sure, sure. We went out to fly at night. We were supposed to go out and drop these practice bombs on the range where they had the spotters that spotted the bomb hits and gave you the number of feet over from the target: left, right, short, long. Those people were down in block houses and had radio contact with the planes. This one night, the bombardier and the co-pilot had been in the officers' club drinking and they came out to the plane without their oxygen masks, without their headphones, without cold gear, because we were going up to 12- or 14-, 15,000 feet to drop these bombs and it was extremely cold at those altitudes. While we had the heaters—and I use the word loosely—for the cockpit and the front section, they did not work after you reached, say, 12- or 14,000 feet. It was so cold up there.

These two were drunk when they entered. We went up. I shouldn't have taken them up, I suppose. But we went up and the only thing that saved them from becoming court martialed was that we dropped those bombs and they were like ten feet off of the target, which was Five feet! Bull's eye! And it was the only thing that saved them! (laughter)

DePue: Were these dummy bombs they were using?

Smith: Yes they were. They were those blue bombs like you see in front of the Army-Navy

surplus stores standing on the fins. When we used them, they were filled with sand and they had a five-pound or ten-pound black powder charge in them so that when they hit, if it was in the daytime, they got a puff of smoke where they hit and the crew that was down below in the block house that was commanding this thing would give you the data on where they hit: ten feet over, ten feet left, ten feet right, a hundred feet left, out of the range –whatever it was, so you had a good idea of how the bombardier was doing.

I had another instance where we were dropping bombs at night. The range that we went to had four circles of light. They were round circles. We were assigned one of these circles. Well, we went out this one night and we saw this circle of light and we were in the process of maneuvering to get into position to drop this practice bomb, and I looked for the other three circles of light and I couldn't find them. We looked and looked, and I looked and looked and I finally said, "Bombardier, hold the bomb. We can't drop. We're nowhere near the range." Sure enough, we went a little farther and found the range where they had those four circles of light.

The circle of light we were looking at was the town square somewhere in Washington state! Well, it didn't hit me that we hadn't dropped, but the thing that called my attention to the fact that this little town had a problem, or could have had a problem, was the fact that I read in the newspaper later that someone had dropped a practice bomb, which didn't do much damage, into that little circle of light somewhere down in that little town that had that circle of light in their town square.

DePue: I wonder if the community decided, Let's turn these lights off? (laughter)

Smith: I have no idea..

DePue: Did you do any formation flying practice while you were in Washington?

Smith: Yes we did. We practiced quite a bit and we practiced also engine losses. We shut down an engine so that we flew on three engines, in formation and so on.

DePue: I would think that flying in formation takes a different level of attention to detail and focus.

Smith: Yes. I think we did a good job. I did a good job and I think the organization that I was attached to overseas, the Kimbolton people, did a good job. I say that from experience. I took off late because there was trouble in the aircraft and to catch up to the group that I usually flew with was just impossible. They were gone for fifteen or twenty minutes when I took off. They were miles away and there was just no catching up. So I found another group that was flying over the English Channel, and I joined that group. And I never saw such ragged flying in all of my life. They were up and down, up ahead and back. They were just maneuvering all over the place to stay in formation.

The group that I flew with, the people were **wonderful** flyers. The planes just held their position. If one of them moved a little bit, the other one moved with it.

They anticipated turns; they anticipated altitude changes. There was just a total difference between that group and the group that I usually flew with. So I hunted up another group to fly with in that mission. I did not finish the mission with my own group and I told the commanding officer later on that I'd flown with a certain group, identifying them by the tail insignia, and they were pretty ragged flyers. We noticed that the German defenders would look at the groups and the ones that were hanging together very steadily, they did not approach as well as the ones that were flying ragged formations.

DePue: Why were the formations, those tight formations, so important?

Smith: They were important because when you dropped the load of bombs, they landed practically on top of each other in a tight formation. In ragged formation, the bombs could be anywhere.

DePue: Were they important also because of the interlocking fires you had from all the machine guns on board?

Smith: That's another effect, yes.

DePue: We kind of got ahead of the story a little bit, which is fine, but I do want to get you overseas as quickly as we can here. So after you got done with your training in Washington, were you sent over as an individual or as an aircraft crew or as a squadron? Or how did that happen?

Smith: We were sent over as a crew. When we got through flying in Washington State, I had orders to fly to Grand Island, Nebraska from Washington State. And of course we flew that one day to Grand Island, Nebraska. Well, at Grand Island, Nebraska, they gave us another aircraft, one that we were not acquainted with fully. We waited a couple of days there, as I recall, and then we were briefed for an airport in Maine. We were to go up there to that airport.

DePue: Bangor?

Smith: Bangor, Maine. We got this other airplane and we flew cross-country to Bangor, Maine. We, in fact, flew across the tip of the Great Lakes—Lake Michigan—around that way, staying out of Canada as much as possible until we got up further across Lake Huron. We landed in Bangor, Maine. In Bangor, Maine, we stayed over night and the next morning, we flew up to...

DePue: I've got Keflavic, Iceland?

Smith: No, not to Keflavic. We didn't go over there until we had touched an airport in...

DePue: Was it Nova Scotia?

Smith: …Nova Scotia. And we stayed overnight there, and boy were those people **mad.**

DePue: Really?

Smith: Yes. Oh, were they mad. The PX ship with the beer had been sunk by a German sub! (laughter) They asked us, "If you see any German subs, let us know!"

DePue: Now there's something to fight about, right?

Smith: Yes. (laughter) They were short of beer. The next morning we took off from there and we flew to Keflavic, Iceland and we stayed overnight there for, I think, two days, while a storm eased up on the North Atlantic. Then we flew across the tip of Greenland to Prestwick, Scotland. When we got to Prestwick, Scotland, we think it was just being developed because they had one runway and this runway was carved out of the rolling hills surrounding Prestwick. We stayed in Sonstone(?) Mansion on the edge of the airfield that night. Wonderful accommodations. The next morning, we went out to fly. Well, we were met by a commanding general of the Air Force. There were several of us there at that time and we flew down into a place in middle England where they were maintaining aircraft and modifying them for the conditions in the...

DePue: For flights in Europe?

Smith: Yeah, for flights over Europe. And one of the things that they did was to take off the de-icing boots on the wings so that they had more perfect airflow over the wings for greater lift. The second thing was that they took the propeller de-icers off because the fluids were flammable, and any hit in the plane would set off the fluid and we'd have a fire that couldn't be controlled. So they took that off and modified them with low-pressure oxygen systems. Otherwise, from when they came into the field from the United States, they had high-pressure oxygen systems for breathing oxygen. These were low-pressure systems with the bottles that if they got a flack hit, would just rupture a little bit and let the oxygen out, but they wouldn't explode. The high pressure bottles, with a hit of some kind, would explode. So they did a lot of different modifications on the aircraft, including some of the radio equipment.

DePue: Was this at Kimbolton, or a different base?

Smith: No, this was at a different base. I forget what the name of that base was, but it was somewhere in the area. Then they put us in the school outside of London for about a week or ten days. We had to learn about the radio methods in England and what we could expect from the German aircraft and the conditions over the Channel. If you got into the Channel, there were lifebuoys available, so that you could get into one of them and either the English or Germans would pick you up.

DePue: I'd imagine that when you go to a school like this, being this close to combat now, your instructors have your full and undivided attention, don't they?

Smith: Oh yes. Yes. They do. They were interesting subjects taught there. Very interesting. And you had to follow their reasoning for these things. They gave you reasons for them. Very interesting classes.

DePue: So from here, then you head to Kimbolton.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: And do you go to Kimbolton as an individual crew and you're replacing an aircraft in a squadron that maybe got shot down or damaged or something?

Smith: That is essentially true. We went as a crew and we picked up a couple of extra crew members. In fact, one of the people that flew with me across to England, refused to fly when we got to England. I don't know what happened, why, or anything. But we never saw him again. He was taken off and whatever they do. But he was a radio man and I picked up a radio operator for the crew who had been in the British Air Force, English Air Force, and he was a veteran also of the English Air Force, but he transferred over to us and I forget—I got a couple of other replacements, also.

Oh. On the first mission, I lost my bombardier. He volunteered to fly with another crew and we watched him parachute out.

DePue: You can't start with much tougher mission than going into Schweinfurt, your first mission when you were there. But I wanted to talk a little bit about the organization that you had as well. Why don't you go ahead and show the camera here your shirt—pull it out here—the K right over here is the K—I assume that's the symbol for Kimbolton?

Smith: Kimbolton, yes.

DePue: Kim-bolton, Okay. And then that's obviously the 8th Air Force symbol there.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: And I know I've got a couple pictures here that show...There is Kimbolton Field. Does that look familiar to you?

Smith: Yes. I had never seen it from that high an altitude, though. I was always landing at that point.

DePue: I'm sure it was a welcome sign.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: And here's a photo of your crew.

Smith: That's right.

DePue: You were assigned to which squadron and which bomb group?

Smith: This was the 527th Bomb Squadron, 379th Bomb Group; this was the Ruthie's Crew and I was the pilot.

DePue: How did it end up being called Ruthie?

Smith: Ruthie. I had a crew chief, the ground crew chief, and he came to me one day. The plane was not named when I flew it the first several times and he came to me one day and said, "Would you mind, Lieutenant, if I named this plane Ruthie?" And I said, "No, that's fine.My mother's name is Ruth." And he said, "Well that's the name of my girlfriend back in the States." I said, "Oh, and where are you from in the States?" Well, he says, "I'm from in Illinois." And he says, "I'm living in a little town north of Peoria." "Oh." I didn't ask anymore. But I said, "Fine." So the next time I went out to fly, the name was painted on it.

DePue: I'm sure that meant the world to him to have that name on it, too.

Smith: Yes, I think it did.

DePue: So you've got yourself, you've got a co-pilot, and what's the rest of the crew then?

Smith: Well, there's the navigator and the bombardier, which I lost on the first mission, and the engineer, the radio man, two waist gunners—one left, one right—and a tail gunner.

DePue: I know a lot of these people pulled double duty because even a couple of the officers are behind machine guns at times, right?

Smith: Yes they are. Yes. They were behind those machine guns up in the nose compartment. The navigator and the bombardier had their own weapons.

DePue: Okay. What I'd like to do now is take a quick three to five minute break and then we'll get into the actual combat itself if you don't mind, Jim.

Smith: Okay.

(end of interview #1—#2 continues)

# Interview with James E. Smith
# VR2-V-L-2007-026.02
Interview #2: November 2, 2007
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: This is

DePue: This is Mark DePue. I'm back with Jim Smith again, the B-17 pilot from the World War II era, obviously. Jim, what I want to start with in this session is, you've gotten us to Kimbolton now. Tell me a little bit more about the 527th. How many aircraft in the 527th?

Smith: There was twenty-one aircraft.

DePue: In that one squadron.

Smith: Yes. Plus spares of course.

DePue: How many squadrons would be in a group?

Smith: A group? There'd be three squadrons. So there'd be sixty-three aircraft.

DePue: How many would typically fly in the squadron at any one time? Would they take them all up?

Smith: Hopefully all of them would go.

DePue: So as many as were operational at a time?

Smith: At a time.

DePue: And it's not just the crew members; there are hundreds of people on the ground crews as well?

Smith: Oh yes. Absolutely. There's probably as many on the ground crew as there is on the air crews.

DePue: I know your first mission was the Schweinfurt mission, and that's a very famous mission. Or maybe from your perspective, infamous, because it was a brutal mission. This was actually the second time that the 8th Air Force had gone after

Schweinfurt.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: Why Schweinfurt?

Smith: There was a ball bearing factory there and they thought that everything ran on ball bearings. It was a manufacturing center as well as the ball bearings, I'm sure. Breaking the ball bearing factory would reduce the output of aircraft, tanks, trucks, anything that ran that needed a ball bearing part. So we went after it.

DePue: You were not a pilot on this mission, though.

Smith: I was the co-pilot. I was sent on this mission to see how the missions were operated. I cut my teeth on that mission.

DePue: I know the policy at that time was twenty-five missions. Was this considered a combat mission for you?

Smith: Yes, it was.

DePue: Why twenty-five? Why would you have somebody who gets twenty-five missions and have all that experience and then say they don't have to fly anymore?

Smith: Because of the attrition rate. At one time, they figured that twenty-five missions was all that the person could stand, first of all. Secondly, if he made twenty-five missions, he was just lucky to have made them.

DePue: That says a lot about how dangerous this job was that you found yourself in.

Smith: Oh, it was a **dangerous, dangerous** job.

DePue: Can you go through, in as much detail as you can recall then, that Schweinfurt mission. I want you to start with the briefing. So many of us have many pictures of what those briefings are like, watching movies like *12 O'Clock High* and others. So if you could start with that part.

Smith: You went into the briefing room and you sat down and the commanding officer came in and everyone stood up. I don't recall whether they saluted the commanding officer or not, but everyone stood up and he would then say, "Seats, gentlemen," and you all sat down.

Then he'd pull the sheet that covered the target area off of the blackboard with a map of Germany on it, in this case. This sheet covered this target area and when he did this, the whole group groaned—"Ugggh," like that. I did not understand why they groaned until I went on the mission and it was one where they knew that they had a very bad loss rate. In this case, I think I've heard, that there were only 240 or 250 aircraft went to that mission.

DePue: This is the Schweinfurt mission on October 14.

Smith: On October 14. When we got there we saw nothing but German fighters. None of our own were operational in the air and we encountered **heavy** resistance. The planes went down: one, two, three, four. Well, sixty of them were lost. In fact, after the mission, we were stood down, which means that we did not fly missions for a long period of time. I understood—this was hearsay—that there was a possibility that they were going to start flying night missions where the losses would be less, they thought.

But it didn't happen, and about that time I think that General Doolittle took over the 8th Air Force. General Doolittle pushed the development of long-range fighters, which were the P-51s. The P-51s started appearing as our missions progressed. But we were stood down for a long period of time –at least three weeks after that mission.

DePue: While the brass was figuring out if this was the best way to proceed.

Smith: Yes.

DePue: How quickly did you pick up German fighters? Was it just after you crossed the Channel?

Smith: Yes. The minute we got over the Channel. In fact, some of them, I think, hit us while we were going over the Channel. They were just relentless. In fact, I watched one of them come through the formation upside down. He actually turned over. He had an armor-plated belly on one of those German aircraft. I watched as the tracers bounced off of that belly, knowing that there were five armor-piercing projectiles in between each one of those tracers. He was absorbing or taking those hits and deflecting them; we don't know because we could not see the armor-piercing ones. But we did know that the tracers were... Someone had the range and azimuth and the whole business to shoot down a fighter.

DePue: What kind of German fighters were coming at you?

Smith: Folke-Wulf 190s, I believe, mostly. We did have a few of the others...

DePue: Messerschmitt?

Smith: Messerschmitts... But none of the twin-engine fighters did we see—the Folkers, Junkers JU-88s or any of those that day.

DePue: I think they used those primarily for the night fighter missions.

Smith: Night fighters, yes.

DePue: Which one of those aircraft was more feared by the Americans?

Smith: I think the Folke-Wulf 190s.

DePue: Do you know if your airplane that you were in that day had any direct attacks against it?

Smith: I can't really say whether they did or not, because we were flying a wing, as a wingman off of the leader of the squadron. I can't tell you whether there were any direct hits. I don't really remember.

DePue: Once you get past the fighters—or maybe you never do get past the fighters except for a short period of time over the target zone—what happens then?

Smith: Over the target, fighters get away from you because you're dropping high explosives and they don't like high explosives. They don't like to tangle with them. During that time, generally, the fighters stay away and the minute you drop your ordnance and get off of the target and make your turn to go home, they bore in from front and back and everywhere.

DePue: What point in the mission would you start picking up flak? [anti-aircraft fire]

Smith: It depended on your route. In some cases, they'd move flak batteries into the routes that you normally would take to go in. We had certain routes. For instance, going over the Zeider Zee in Holland, over into Holland and they had flak boats, barges, that they mounted their anti-aircraft guns on in the Zuider Zee. They would send up a barrage as you passed over them; any time you passed over flak battery, you were going to get it.

DePue: When you went into Schweinfurt, how long were you under flak fire at that time?

Smith: I would say were only under flak fire for about five minutes.

DePue: It must seem like an awfully long time though.

Smith: Oh, it is. Once you've been through it –I'll tell you—there's nothing to compare to it. It's a horrifying experience. If you've seen this movie, *12 O'Clock High*, those black bursts that were out in front of these planes were flak; the black bursts were 88 millimeter shells that burst into pieces of shrapnel that goes in every direction when that explosion occurs.

We could not hear in the cockpit, because it had engines between us, and our earphones [were] on; but the men in back, even though they had earphones on, could hear the bursts and hear the flak sizzle as it went past the aircraft. Hissed.

DePue: So this is your first mission. You've got fighters that are dogging you from the time you cross the channel all the way to the target area and then you've got this short, intense period of flak fire and then you've got fighters, I assume, that dogged you all the way back.

Smith: All the way back.

DePue: How long a time period is this? Three or four hours?

Smith: I would say that it was four hours in this case. We had other missions that were longer. Some of the flak was more intense in some places than in others.

DePue: So this is again, your first mission. What are your emotions? What's going through your brain at this time?

Smith: (chuckles) Well, kind of numb. Yes. It was a numbing experience, believe me. You did a lot of praying that you'd get through this without being killed, that the plane would survive, that you would survive. I've often told my wife that I think God had a little guardian angel sitting right on my shoulder as I went through these flak fields and was under attack from enemy aircraft.

DePue: You've got to feel incredibly vulnerable. Especially, you're just observing now. You can't do anything except sit there?

Smith: Sit there and fly. Keep the plane level, keep it on course and away from the other planes, because a missed cue on your part can damage the plane, can cause it to crash, could endanger the whole mission. So you've got a lot of responsibility sitting in that cockpit. It was a big weight off of your mind when you got back, wheels down, and touched the runway landing.

DePue: I would assume, after four or six hours in the air like this, and having your life any moment could end, and all the tension and stress, that you had to be exhausted by the time you got back.

Smith: It was an exhausting experience. It was. We had several missions that I'm going to tell you about that lasted twelve hours. I sat in the seat, flying for twelve hours straight. We went to the Kiel Canal on two successive days and I sat in that seat for twelve hours on each of those two days. We got a little too close to a fortified island in the North Sea called Heligoland and they lobbed a few shells at us but we were quite aways away and they weren't too accurate, thank goodness. Of course they knew we were on the way, and probably knew where we were going because we were sure that, in the case of Schweinfurt, they had brought planes down from Norway to meet us with aircraft. We could tell where the planes were from by looking at the markings on them and reporting them to the debriefing officers that debriefed us at the end of the flight. They knew where these planes were from.

DePue: You mentioned on the Schweinfurt mission that, out of the 240 plus aircraft that started the mission, there were sixty that were lost. I'm sure there were lots of casualties on those aircraft that managed to get back to England itself and that they stood you down for a little while. Did you find out or did you get any feedback about how effective the mission was?

Smith: The cameras in the lead planes of the squadrons would photograph the ground.

They had these aerial cameras that we carried. In my case, my radio man was particularly good and he remembered to turn on the switches that started these aerial cameras operating. They would take a 12 X 12 picture of the ground as we progressed over, including air strike, and we'd see from that how effective our mission was.

DePue: So, did you think it was fairly effective, that Schweinfurt raid?

Smith: They say that it was.

DePue: You might not be aware that, long after the war, people were interviewing Albert Speer, who was head of munitions and in charge of production for Germany, who was afraid that you'd keep punching at Schweinfurt because it was very effective and it was so crucial a part of it. But they tried it that one time and they didn't go back, did they? At least not right away.

Smith: No, not right away. As I recall, from my memory there were several Schweinfurt raids before this one. Or maybe one before this one. Then there was one or two after this one, but I did not participate in any of those follow-ups.

DePue: This seems to be the one that's been written about the most, at least.

Smith: Right.

DePue: Now after that, I know you hit Bremen at least five times.

Smith: Five times, yes.

DePue: What was at Bremen that was so important?

Smith: There were submarine pens. They were equipping these submarines and they had these submarines where they were refitting them in some underground armor-plated submarine docks. The object was to drop in the water as close as possible with these bombs so the explosion would damage these submarines. I went there five different times. It was a long trip, also, going in there.

DePue: Was it one of these times that you especially had a hard time of it?

Smith: Yes.

DePue: I wonder if you can tell us in as much detail as you can recall.

Smith: Well, the first thing that happened that set this all off was that a higher group had a low squadron and they were not high enough to miss our high squadron of our lower group, and they almost collided in mid-air. As a result, to avoid the collisions, the aircraft were scattered all over the sky due to the fact that this one lower squadron of this higher group was on a collision course with the high squadron of a lower group. Because of this collision course, the planes had to avoid

each other; as a result, there were airplanes all over the sky.

Well, that's the kind of thing the German pilots would look for, something like that happening; hey would bore in immediately to these lone aircraft that were out of place. This happened, and my squadron leader took a hit from the anti-aircraft that was over the area also, and went down. So we were separated because of this collision course also.

I started in to push the engines on this plane and it was the wrong thing to do. I pushed the engines too hard and I blew a cylinder head on number three engine, which would be, counting from left to right as you look from the cockpit looking ahead—one, two, three, four—so number three engine had a cylinder head split open, and the oil all gushed out of that. And it was **cold**. I mean, it was **deadly cold**. It was **so cold** that the oil came out of that engine and stood up on the wing like a lump of tar. Hot oil. Just imagine the oil in your automobile doing this. Stood up on the wing for a long time as just a lump of tar. And as we got lower, of course, it melted. I was all alone by that time and I had a call from the tail gunner that there was a fighter coming up on our tail. I said, "Watch him, and let me know if you want to maneuver, to jump." In other words, you watch the plane and if he fires, you can see the flashes on the wings and you **pull up** out of his way. He's aiming at you and you're up here. That's the place to be at that time!

Well I had enough. Oh, about that time, something else happened. There was an alternator under my seat that took the battery power and produced alternating current for the instruments. There was apparently a short somewhere in the electrical system and that alternator was overloaded and started to smoke. So we had smoke in the cockpit, the German fighter in the back creeping up on us. We turned off the electricity. About that time, a fighter ahead of us came in and put a few shells into the radio room. Before that happened, I had called the radio man and had him reach into the bomb bay to open some valves to get the wing-tip tanks to flow into the main tanks of the aircraft. We had all that reserve in the wing-tip tanks. He was in the process of doing that when the shells burst in the radio room. It was due to the fact that I took my eyes off of this German fighter that was ahead of me shooting at us. If I had seen him—and I had seen him several times –the minute I saw the wings light up, I pull up. The first time; the second time I let down abruptly. So that between the time that he fired and the time that the shell reached the area that we were, I was out of the picture, beyond range of him.

This one time they got the shells in there and they did damage to the electrical system and also they wounded the radio man, who was not seriously wounded. He was peppered with shrapnel from the twenty millimeter aircraft cannon. About that time, the fighter, once he saw that he had made a hit of some kind, disappeared. I realized later that he got out of there because there was an English aircraft in the area, an English fighter, and that English fighter escorted us home. Thank goodness.

DePue: One of the most welcome sights of the entire war, I would think.

Smith: Ooooh yes. That was just getting to the English Channel to [fly] over it, to get out of Germany, almost at Bremerhaven. But it was hairy.

DePue: So did you have an opportunity to count the holes once you got back home?

Smith: The ground crew told me that they put eighty patches on that plane and that they had fixed the wiring and that it was a good, serviceable airplane.

DePue: They had to replace the engine or just repair the engine?

Smith: They replaced it.

DePue: And is this mission also, that you ended up blowing a tire when you landed?

Smith: No, no, that was another mission. That was actually a mercy mission over the Channel. The English Air Force had gone out at night and they had bombed some place **far** into Germany. When they turned around to go home, they encountered a headwind instead of a tailwind that they had counted on. As a result, they lost a lot of English aircraft and personnel over the Channel. There were flares that downed fliers had shot during the night. The next day, we went out to fly over the Channel and we flew back and forth over the Channel.

I had made the landing from one of the practice missions that we had done—a pretty hard landing. I turned into the parking space as I landed the second time and as I was turning into this parking space, **BAM!** One of the tires blew out. Well, we left the aircraft and they replaced the tire and I took off and went to my own home airfield. I was pulling into my parking space at the airport at Kimbolton, and **BAM!** The other tire blew. Did I get razzed about that! Two in one day. Two in one day! I can't believe it.

DePue: (chuckling) That's the kind of thing that they like to give each other grief about, huh?

Smith: Oh, yes.

DePue: You mentioned before that you went to the Kiel Canal twice?

Smith: Yes.

DePue: In most of these missions, I assume especially in the mission that you were flying over for the submarine pens, you're using high explosive and maybe with the live fuses on there. But I read someplace that for the Kiel missions, you're using incendiary bombs as well?

Smith: As well, yes.

DePue: What was the target there?

Smith: I can't really say. I don't remember exactly what that target was, but I think it was some of the locks and the control facilities of those locks. Yes, we bombed and we did leave some incendiaries. And one of the incendiaries was… This was such a long mission. I sat in my seat for twelve hours on that mission and we had a 450 gallon auxiliary tank of gasoline that we carried in the bomb bay besides the wing-tip tanks, the regular tanks in the aircraft and this 450 gallon auxiliary—they had put an explosive charge in it—so when we dropped it, when it hit, being rubber and fiber it would explode and burn like an incendiary bomb.

DePue: You had already used the fuel in the auxiliary tank?

Smith: All but five gallons.

DePue: But there still was plenty of fire because of the rubber involved.

Smith: Yes—rubber and fiber.

DePue: I know another mission you had was against –I might be pronouncing this wrong—Abbeville?

Smith: Yes, this was near Abbeville. We could see Abbeville from the bomb site. The bomb site was a ramp for shooting these buzz bombs. They had started building those all along the English coast and pointed them toward London.

These buzz bombs were a little airplane that had a gasoline-propelled engine, but it worked a little differently than just a regular engine. It had a flap on it that closed the system off. They had an ignition system that would touch off an explosion within this tubular mechanism of the buzz bomb; it would exhaust and then the flap would open due to suction of the escaping gasses. They'd put a little more fuel in and touch it off again and boom boom boom and it buzzed as it went. They were preparing to blow London off the map with those buzz bombs.

We went there to this place near Abbeville on several occasions to break those ramps up. I hope we did. I don't know that we did, because on the first trip, it was a milk run. In other words, no opposition to our trip. On the second one, they'd moved some flak batteries in there and they were shooting at us. We weren't up there particularly high because we wanted high precision with these bombs being on French soil.

DePue: Trying to avoid causing civilian casualties?

Smith: Yes.

DePue: So how high would you be flying then?

Smith: We would be flying 14,000 feet.

DePue: What was the typical altitude?

Smith: Anywhere from 28,000 to 31,500 feet.

DePue: It's pretty cold that high up, isn't it?

Smith: Oh, miserably cold. In fact, on the first several missions, the waist gunners are out in the air. They're shooting through an open window with their 50 caliber machine guns. There's a triangular patch between the oxygen mask, the fur-lined helmet, and the goggles. There was a little patch in there. And those two waist gunners both came out of those trips with frostbite in those triangular patches. I took their helmets down to the parachute shop and they had cut up a fur-lined flying suit and gotten little patches and they sewed them in there and gave them a rubber band to put around their chin to hold those patches in place and to stop the frostbite. But they were miserable with that frostbite. One of our local doctors here in Springfield was the flight surgeon for the group—as maybe I mentioned that to you—and he directed that they do that.

DePue: I would have thought that everybody would have had the same problems, that the Army would have figured that they needed to fix that problem.

Smith: Sometimes you do these things on the spur of the moment. For instance, they had these electrical flying suits that were nothing but the electric blanket version, but they're flying suits. They plugged them in when they got on the aircraft. Well, the movement in the creases of the arms, where your arms bend and your knees bend, would break the little electric wires in the electric blankets, much as an electric blanket going bad in your home. As a result, the electric blanket didn't work. The flying suit didn't work. So we had a number of those and I, having had some electrical experience myself, had taken a couple of them and taken a couple of pieces of very flexible wire—almost—they were copper foil. I bridged where they were open and repaired several of them for our crew. We had an extra one or two of them because they'd gotten new ones for the old ones and I had the ones repaired. It was a good thing, because we used them.

DePue: There's American ingenuity for you.

Smith: Yes, amen.

DePue: It sounds like, not only are you living on the edge of death and you've got all that tension and you're miserably cold a lot of the times, but I assume if you're on an eight to twelve-hour mission, you also have the problem of needing to relieve yourself and not being able to do that. Was that an issue?

Smith: In those days, with me, it was not. In fact, I sat in that cockpit from take-off to landing for those twelve hours on that one mission. The others did the same thing. I think there was only one or two missions where I felt that I had to relieve myself and that was with a relief tube that they had developed to get rid of the urine.

DePue: Okay. A couple other missions I knew you flew over France as well. There was one—was it a German flight school that you attacked? And another time that you

were attacking a rail line?

Smith: Yes. The one to the flight school. We went in a long, long way into France and we were getting in close to the target; the weather closed in and obscured the target. The policy was that, in occupied territory when you can see the target, you bomb it. If you can't see the target, you don't bomb. So we didn't bomb; we brought our bombs back and landed.

DePue: Is that a little bit trickier when you've got bombs on board when you're landing then?

Smith: Not really. You've used up a lot of fuel, so you've lightened the plane. You know that fuel weighs eight pounds per gallon and you've got 2,300 gallons of it, so that is a **lot** of weight.

DePue: Do you have a different attitude going into a mission in Germany versus going into a mission when you're bombing occupied territory?

Smith: I don't think so. The attitude was: Let's hit the target. The target planners are supposed to have cleared this with the French, Holland, Luxembourg people, the officials. We had to assume that they did, saying, We're going to do this, do you have any objection? I assume they did this, but I really don't know. But no, if it's a legitimate target, yes, we're going to bomb.

DePue: When you talk about the Dutch and the French and the Belgians, you're talking about the governments that had set up in England itself so that they're talking to the officials?

Smith: Yes, yes.

DePue: Not to get the information out the resistance movements there?

Smith: No, no. I think that some of the information went to the resistance, but I don't know that all of it did.

DePue: I know that a lot of the lore about being on these bombing crews—I assume it's the same kind of thing for the fighters—is that it's such a different kind of experience than if you're in the infantry and in the trenches or you're in the front lines all the time. You've got these incredibly intense moments where you're actually on the mission, but then you come back to England and... it's completely different. Can you explain, what was that like?

Smith: Going into a bombing run was one thing and you tried to keep those things separated. Hopefully, in England, you did some good. You looked at some of the damage in London and some of the other places and said, "It's a terrible thing to do, but we've got to do it."

DePue: Did you take kind of a stoic attitude toward your business, then?

Smith: Yes, we had to.

DePue: When you say you had to, why?

Smith: No other way. You had to be stoic. You say, "Well, we're going out on the mission today. We hope we get back. If we don't, we've done our best."

DePue: You must have known casualties. You knew people who—

Smith: Oh yes. I think the casualties that bothered me the worst were for one particular aircraft full of men. I know they jumped out over the Channel. In the Channel, there was only six minutes of life due to the temperature that you endured. These men jumped and the plane flew on by itself. I don't know where it landed by itself, nobody on it. We had radio silence, you couldn't say, "Don't jump, you guys! Don't jump!" We counted the chutes, and the only thing that was wrong with that airplane was shrapnel burst on one wing tip. It looked like a huge shark had bit that wing tip and there was just a circular pattern missing on just that tip. And the plane flew on all by itself.

DePue: It actually hit the ground in one piece?

Smith: I don't know where it hit. We never knew. Because we couldn't follow it. It went on and on and on over the Channel.

DePue: So did you know what happened to the men who bailed out?

Smith: No. No. The only thing we could see was, there were chutes opened and they were okay when they left the plane, but we were just going over the Channel. We don't know whether they maneuvered the chutes. You had a certain maneuverability with a parachute by pulling the shrouds on one side or the other, and I don't know what happened to them today.

DePue: This radio man you said was injured in your crew. He was the only casualty you suffered?

Smith: He was the only casualty we suffered in the crew. That's right.

DePue: So the members of Ruthie must have thought, We're a pretty lucky crew? Pretty fortunate crew?

Smith: We were. We were a very lucky crew.

DePue: Casualties certainly in other aircraft in the squadron, in the group though...

Smith: Oh, yes. They took the possessions of several of the crews out of our barracks on the base to send home. I don't remember the names and I don't think I would mention them anyway, here on camera.

DePue: Did they have memorial services or any kind of remembrance for them?

Smith: I can't really tell you whether they did or they didn't. I don't know if they did or didn't. I think the people in Kimbolton, in a church that we could see as we flew away, held services for us.

DePue: But was it kind of, maybe not written policy, but just part of being in a bomber crew, that you didn't dwell too much on the ones who had died.

Smith: That's right. Yes. It was best not to.

DePue: Any other particular missions that you recall? Well let's do this. I know you had R&R sometime in the middle of your missions. Tell us a little bit about that.

Smith: Oh! R&R... Went down to Blackpool. There was a newspaper magnate in England that had a big home down there with manicured gardens; some of the gardens had these trees that were cut into figures and designs. It was a beautiful place. Yes, we had R&R and we went down there for a week or ten days. I guess it was a week. And it was warm, warmer than the area that we were in and they had these beach walks. Everything down in Blackpool. It was quite a place to go.

DePue: How long did that last, just a few days?

Smith: Yes, about one week.

DePue: I knew one of your later missions, towards the end of your twenty-five that you ended up having, was a raid on the Ruhr Valley, which was the heart of the industrial sector of Germany at the time.

Smith: Yes, yes. Ten hundred and forty two, I think, anti-aircraft batteries in that. You could walk on the flak. They were shooting at our— we had fighters by that time.

DePue: And this was a huge mission, wasn't it?

Smith: Oh yes, yes. Maximum effort as I recall. They had these **heavy** anti-aircraft guns that had a white burst. Our fighters were three, four, five thousand feet above us flying around and the Germans were shooting at the fighters with the heavy AA [anti-aircraft] guns. They were shooting at us with the 88 millimeters; they had the black bursts. You could walk on the flak.

DePue: Was that a successful mission otherwise?

Smith: I think that it was.

DePue: I had read someplace that there was—maybe this was a different mission—that there was 3,500 planes. Halberstaat, Brunschweig, and Ausch—

Smith: Aschersleben.

DePue: Was that in the Ruhr Valley region?

Smith: No, I can't say that it was. I would say that it was up toward Bremen, in that general direction.

DePue: But another heavily industrialized area.

Smith: Heavily industrial area. And one of those targets was an airfield where they were assembling aircraft. They made them in underground factories, they tell me, but they had to assemble them and fly them off somewhere, so they had these power plants and assembly plants up in that area.

That day that we flew that mission was a beautiful day. You could see the area for miles around. I looked up ahead of me and there were squadrons of aircraft, groups of aircraft like flies, up ahead of us. You could see for miles that day. Two, three, four of those squadrons. Groups of aircraft going into the targets. As we turned around to hit our targets and dropped and turned back on the outgoing route, I looked at the planes coming in. More groups of aircraft, like swarms of mosquitoes, swarms of flies. I never saw so many airplanes in my life in the air. It was just amazing. That mission was something else.

DePue: It gives you a sense of the might and the power that the Americans and the Brits had put into this.

Smith: Yes. It was all American aircraft, too. The British bombed at night. We bombed during the daytime.

DePue: Maybe this is a good time to ask you about that, then. What do you think about the different approach the Brits took, to what the Americans did?

Smith: It kept them on their toes and it kept the Germans busy all night in the bomb shelters and wherever they're going to weather this blitz. But it kept them on their toes.

DePue: Did the American fliers have an attitude that, We do it better, that we're a little bit braver? Or wasn't there that attitude?

Smith: I really don't know. I couldn't answer that.

DePue: Okay. I know, you mentioned another mission where apparently you were flying and a P-47 [U.S. fighter plane] had an enemy fighter on its tail.

Smith: Yes, he had an enemy fighter on his tail. As I recall, he came by the formation at the same level as our plane with this enemy on his tail and our people were shooting at the fighter that was chasing him. He brought him by the formation (chuckles) to get him off his back.

DePue: Did it work?

Smith: I have no idea. I recognized the rat-a-tat-tat of the machine guns back of me and all of a sudden, the top turret gunner brought his guns facing forward, fired, and the vibration shook down all of the dust and the collection of dust in the top of the cockpit, padding, right down. I was just glad I was on oxygen. (laughter)

DePue: What kind of a cruising speed did you normally run?

Smith: Our cruising speed was not very high compared to other aircraft. Our cruising speed was somewhere between 140 and 150, air speed. Now, you have to think about air speed versus ground speed. Air speed is one thing measured by these instruments on the panel. Ground speed is the accumulation of the density of the air and your altitude, and the fact that, for every thousand feet, the ground speed goes up 2 percent for every thousand feet over what you read on the air speed.

So you're going at 30,000 feet, you're doing 145 miles an hour airspeed, you calculate that at 60 percent faster ground speed. So 140 miles per hour air speed would be about 200 miles an hour ground speed or maybe more, depending on the wind.

remember one case where we headed for a target and we spent seven and a half hours I think, getting into that target. We turned off of the target after we dropped and headed back and we made it from that point where we dropped the bombs back over the Zuider Zee, going over the Channel in forty-five minutes. We had picked up a **tremendous** tail wind going back that had been our headwind going in.

DePue: And it was a very welcome tailwind, too, I would think.

Smith: Oh, amen.

DePue: Your twenty-fifth mission, then, is about March of 1944?

Smith: Yes.

DePue: Do you remember that mission?

Smith: I remember very little about that mission. I know that I went, we dropped, and came home. I don't know what it was or where it was. I would have to look at my flight record to see.

DePue: Was the crew, or were you, a little bit more on edge or thinking, "Okay, now we've survived twenty-four; we've just got one more to go?"

Smith: Right. My crew went one more mission, because I had gone one mission ahead of the crew to begin with.

DePue: The Schweinfurt mission.

Smith: The Schweinfurt mission. They did not go on that mission.

DePue: So they had one more afterwards.

Smith: Right. They got to Berlin.

DePue: Oh they did?

Smith: Yes. I missed Berlin by one day.

DePue: And they got back safe, too?

Smith: They got safely back, yes.

DePue: So what happened after that twenty-fifth mission? There's still an awful lot of the war to fight.

Smith: Well, I realized that. The crew and myself were put on an ocean liner to go home after that mission. It was the SS Bremen. [a German ship]

DePue: A little bit of irony there, isn't there?

Smith: Yes, there was! And we ran into a storm on the way home. We made New York Harbor in about four days and a few hours. Even with the storm, there were times when the ship would go down in a trough and the propellers would go out of the water. The water was that rough. In one case, some of the crew was joking about the captain being seasick. (laughter).

But you know, there wasn't an ex-flyer on that trip that got seasick. We were used to seeing the horizon at all different angles, including upside down, and none of us got seasick. I couldn't say that I would be as lucky today as then.

DePue: But did that experience make you happy that you decided to go into the Air Force instead of the Navy?

Smith: It did.

DePue: You saw the Statue of Liberty coming home, then?

Smith: Oh, we did. Beautiful sight. Yes.

DePue: What happened after that, then? Did you head back up to Illinois? Some leave time, I would assume?

Smith: Yes, we got some leave time. I headed back to Illinois and things went from there to better and some to worse from that point on. I went down to Florida for R&R again and of course they had taken me off of flying duty. They had wanted me to go on to the B-29s [bombers] and I said, "No, they're too big." Fighters and that stuff, I'd take, but not 29s. So I didn't go there. I went on home for awhile. As I

recall, my mother had sold her house by that time and she was living with an aunt in Peoria, or outside of Peoria, near Metamora, Illinois. And I went and stayed there..

DePue: Wonder if you could kind of paint us that picture of what it was like when your mom first saw you after all those months and years of worrying about you.

Smith: She was pretty happy to see me. She was very relieved that I was safe, but my brother was in the Navy. He was somewhere in the Pacific at that time, and she was considerably worried about him. This was before I was relieved of complete duty. Then, after I had the leave, I went down to Florida and stayed down there for awhile. I was in R&R down there, and the day that the Japanese surrendered, I was the Officer of the Day and I had to close all the bars in the area. (laughter)

DePue: That's not a good day to have that duty, is it?

Smith: No, no. I had the Sergeant of the Guard with me. He drove and we went around to the bars and closed them. In one of them there was a whole bunch of military men and I kind of relented and I said, "Bartender, give 'em one more drink and then close." (laughter)

DePue: Do you remember the day you heard the news about the atomic bomb being dropped?

Smith: Oh yes I do. That was something else. I had heard that there was some super-bomb coming up. I hadn't realized that it was atomic. To me, it was letting the genie out of the bottle, for one thing. The second thing was, is this going to force the Japanese to surrender? Because they have no recourse other than surrendering; it's going to save a lot of their lives and ours for our not having to invade. Because I had known from talking to some of my fellow soldiers that they were sure that the hills throughout Japan were set up with military apparatus so that any invasion was going to be deadly. I feel that it saved lives on both sides, even though the horrible loss of life in Nagasaki and...

DePue: Hiroshima.

Smith: Hiroshima, yes. I feel badly about it, our having to do it, but I do think that it saved a lot of lives.

DePue: Did you end up getting some medals?

Smith: Oh yes, yes. I got the European medal—not a medal exactly, a ribbon. I got the Air medal with four oak leaf clusters.

DePue: And that's for bravery in action?

Smith: That's for every five missions, for completing those missions, I got that. And then I got a distinguished flying cross for completing the twenty-five missions, yes.

DePue: Are there any other combat experiences that you can recall you'd like to mention? We've covered quite a bit of territory.

Smith: I don't think so. I think that's about all that I want to mention.

DePue: Well, let me get to a more general discussion, then. This might be a peculiar question: B-17, B-24s. Which one do you think was the better aircraft?

Smith: They were designed for different purposes. I'm not an authority on the B-24, but I do think the B-17 had certain aspects of it that were better than those of the B-24. And the aspect of it was, the B-24 was faster, but it would not climb as high because of the Davis wing. The B-17 would outperform the B-24 for height. But they were designed for different purposes.

DePue: Both the Americans and the Brits expended an incredible amount of their resources and paid a very dear price to bomb Germany, that sustained bombing campaign in Germany. And yet, throughout the entire war, Germans were able to maintain a pretty high level of industrial output. Looking back at it now, do you think that effort—the risk that you and your fellow airmen took—was worth the effort?

Smith: I think that it was. Because if we hadn't slowed them down a little bit, they might have conquered more territory than they did. We slowed them down considerably with their military efforts by our military actions.

DePue: A little different kind of question here: which scared you and your crew members more: the enemy fighters, or the flak?

Smith: I can't really say. They were both vicious. They had their purposes and they were both vicious opponents.

DePue: Now, I know that you had mentioned, especially in that Schweinfurt raid, and you ended up participating in that as kind of an observer, that General Eaker—I think it was General Eaker who was the commander of the 8th Air Force at that time—he was obviously one of the people who was behind the concept of throwing that many aircraft over all of those undefended miles with no fighter escort. Then Doolittle comes in. Do you think Doolittle made the right decision to back away from flying without that fighter escort, then?

Smith: Yes. I do. I think that the fighter escort was the deciding factor over there. I don't think that we would have prevailed if we hadn't had that fighter escort, because they did two things. They protected us, but also, they were used afterwards, after we did the bombing. They were used to help our infantry and the man-on-the-ground achieve his goals by defeating the enemy and keeping them away from decimating our ground offensive.

DePue: This next question might be one that you decide you don't want to answer. But I wonder if, you know, you're going on these missions—Germany, France, Belgium, anywhere you go—and you're dropping bombs at 15,000, 25,000 feet. You're

causing civilian casualties. Is that something that you thought about much?

Smith: I had thought about that. And I'm sorry that there had to be civilian casualties, but if there hadn't been those casualties and we hadn't achieved our goals on those targets, the civilian casualties would be our own or the British population. As a result, I feel that we were justified in doing that.

DePue: What did you think about the fellow airmen that you served with?

Smith: Yes.

DePue: Top notch?

Smith: Oh yes. They were. There was an occasional foul ball, but for the most part, they were great people.

DePue: And the officers? The ones over you, perhaps?

Smith: The officers over us were great people also. They tolerated a lot from some of us. (laughter) We were excused for a lot of things and as a result, we performed to their satisfaction, I hope.

DePue: How about, did you have anybody that you especially were close with during your time that you were flying those twenty-five missions?

Smith: Yes, I did. I was close to my co-pilot, who was a real nice man. He had a wife and a child when we went overseas. He'd gone through twin-engine flying school; I had gone through single-engine flying school, which was fine. I kept in touch with him for many years. Leon was his first name; I won't mention the last name. But I kept in touch with him for many years. It turned out when he came back from overseas that he became a law officer and he did a combination duty of law officer and fire chief for a small town.

DePue: Now you saw the enemy in a different way than the soldiers on the ground did. But what did you think about the enemies that you faced?

Smith: I thought they were probably very dedicated people also. They were pushed to do their job, and I won't say that I wasn't pushed a little bit, but we… They did a job and they were protecting their own turf. We were angry at them for the things they pulled and things they did; they didn't stop their officials from doing some of these things. I don't know that they could, but it was just necessary to go in there and do what we did.

DePue: So those fighter pilots that came after you, would it be fair to say you respected them?

Smith: Oh, absolutely. I think there's one of them that came by and gave us a salute one time.

DePue: Really?

Smith: Yeah, flew right by my left-hand wing.

DePue: Wow! What flashes through your mind when you see that?

Smith: Hey, we're brothers. (laughter) In a fraternity.

DePue: And that's hard to explain to somebody else, isn't it..

Smith: Yes it is.

DePue: Okay, just a few questions then to close things up. Tell us a bit about what happened to you after the war.

Smith: After the war? Well, I came home and found that things had turned topsy-turvy with my home life. My mother had sold the house and disposed of the furniture and she was living with an aunt. It was quite sad because my father and I had worked on that house that she sold time and time again to keep it up. He was gone before I went into the service. Some of my prized possessions were gone. But you had to live on, and I did, and here we are.

DePue: Where did you spend your life working, then?

Smith: Oh, my business career! Before the war, I had worked at several places. The last one was Illinois Bell Telephone Company. That was Illinois Bell at that time. It was Ameritech, now AT&T. After the war, I went back to them. I had been a maintenance man in an automatic telephone exchange. This was one of the things I had talked to the interviewer about when I went into the service. I told him I was a switchman and he figured I worked on the railroad. I tried to explain to him that I didn't, but he had already written it down and classified my MOS, [Military Occupation Status] I guess they call it. So I was put in this field artillery and then I went to the Air Force on my own volition.

After the war, I went back to the telephone company and have worked there for many, many years.

DePue: I think you also didn't waste too much time after the end of the war to get married.

Smith: Oh, no no no no. My wife and I have been married for fifty-some years.

DePue: Long time.

Smith: Long time.

DePue: What's your wife's name?

Smith: Jean. Jean L. Smith.

DePue: What was her maiden name?

Smith: She was Jean Tyler. That's a funny thing too, because I felt that that was predetermined also. My brother, now dead, in high school had dated her younger sister. When we went to look for my brother on several occasions—my mother wanted my brother to do something at home—we went out to the farm where the family lived. My brother, of course, wasn't there, but I never met my wife until 1950. It seems that I had a small airplane at a small airport outside of Chicago and they had a hangar dance and this sister of Jean's and Jean, well both sisters in fact, were at that dance. The younger one was just a child when my brother dated the middle sister. As a result, I met Jean (chuckles) and we kind of fell for each other—bingo! We knew we were destined to marry. And as soon as we could, we married.

DePue: You were a little bit older by that time, weren't you?

Smith: I was, yes.

DePue: So you'd been waiting for the right girl for a long time.

Smith: I waited for a looonnnng time.

DePue: Were you able to talk to Jean, or did you want to talk to Jean about your wartime experiences?

Smith: I've talked to her numerous times about some of them, especially some of the humorous ones, I don't remember exactly what I've told her about some of them, but she knows that I've been a pilot and had these experiences.

DePue: Did it take a few years, though, before you started to tell some of these experiences?

Smith: I can't say so. I can't say that. That could be, yes. That could be. I don't remember when I first opened up to talk to her quite a bit.

DePue: Just a couple of questions in conclusion here. Looking back on it, it's been sixty-plus years now. It's been a long time. Do you think the sacrifice that you've made and all your fellow airmen and Americans was worth it?

Smith: Yes I do. I don't think that the United States would have existed if we had to fight on two battle fronts. It might have, but I don't think that it may have. It would have been a terrible loss to the population to be invaded. Even if it was repelled, the losses, I feel, would be horrendous.

DePue: Did the experience change you?

Smith: Yes, I think so.

DePue: How did it change you?

Smith: Well, I think I'm a little more forgiving (chuckles) of some things. I see things in a different light than I did. I think I have more sympathy for people that are downtrodden. I detest some of these things that are going on in these foreign countries where the people are so suppressed, and some of these tragedies, such as these floods and tsunamis and different things. Earthquakes bother me. I think that we should share our wealth with some of these downtrodden people.

DePue: Did you find it difficult to readjust to civilian life after you got back to the United States?

Smith: A little bit. Let me tell you about an experience I had walking down the street. I had just come back from overseas and was walking down the street in my hometown, Chicago Heights, and a car backfired down the street and I found myself flat on the... It was a scary moment. (laughter) Yes. Look, it's something else.

DePue: A little bit embarrassed when you got up?

Smith: Oh, yes.

DePue: Why don't you just close then with some reflections or thoughts. You know, you've been through a lot in your life, not just your experiences in the war, but you've seen a lot obviously afterwards. If you had the opportunity, and you do have now the opportunity, to pass on some wisdom to future generations, what would you tell them?

Smith: We have to consider other people. That's what I would tell them. They have their likes and their dislikes and you cannot force your will on them every minute of the day and night. You have to have sympathy for them when they're in trouble and help them out of their trouble. I have tried to make that a part of my life. When there is some donating to be done, I've donated, if I think the cause is noble. And I do that quite regularly.

DePue: Any final words you have for us then?

Smith: Be kind to each other.

DePue: Okay. This has been a wonderful experience. I certainly think you live up to your advice you're giving others. You've lived a noble and honorable life and it's been my pleasure to interview you today. Thank you very much.

Smith: It was a pleasure, sir.

DePue: Thank you. And that concludes our session today. Thank you.

Smith: Thank you.

(end of interview #2)