Interview with Vasil (Bill) Klyasheff
VR2-A-L-2015-029

Interview #1: August 21, 2015
Interviewer: Pete Harbison

Harbison: My name is Pete Harbison. It is August 21, 2015, and I'm in Granite City, Illinois. I'm interviewing Bill Klyasheff. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library *Veterans Remember* Oral History project. Bill, I'm going to start off asking you when and where you were born.

Klyasheff: Actually I was born in Granite City, Illinois on the 3rd of November, 1923. I lived in Granite City for two days because I was delivered by a midwife, and my folks took me home in two days, and I lived in Madison until I was drafted.

Bill Klyasheff in 1943.

Harbison: Let's just go over your father's story real quick. Tell me what happened to his parents in Macedonia and how he ended up moving to Illinois.

Klyasheff: My dad was born in 1890. His parents were both killed by the Turks in 1892. Consequently, he was raised by an uncle of his. This was, I guess, in the northern part of Greece at the time. The uncle raised him in Bulgaria. When he was age sixteen, my dad and two other friends, relatives really, moved from Bulgaria to Paris, France, where they ended up getting on a boat to the United States. They left from Le Havre, I guess, in France on a boat to the United States.

They got to the United States in 1906. For some reason that I don't know about, they ended up in Granite City and Madison, Illinois, both towns being together practically. My dad worked in the car foundry, and he worked on railroads. He ended up being drafted in to the Army sometime around 1917 or '16, sometime around there. He served in the Army at Fort Dix, New Jersey, or Sandy Hook, New Jersey, as a member of the Coast Artillery.

As soon as the war ended, on November 11, they started phasing him out, and he was discharged on December 19, December 19. I repeat that because I was discharged on December 8. By a strange turn of circumstances, we were both discharged at Camp Grant, Illinois, in two different wars, in the same month.

Harbison: Camp Grant, of course, is in Rockford.

Klyasheff: Rockford, Illinois. He and my mother were married in 1921, and because he was made a citizen while he was in the Army, she automatically became a citizen. At that time, the law read that if you married a veteran you automatically assumed citizenship.

Harbison: And where was she from?

Klyasheff: My mother was from the same area. At that time it was Northern Greece and Macedonia, whatever they called it.

Harbison: Tell me about growing up in this area. Do you have any memories of what your childhood was like?

Klyasheff: Oh my gosh, yes (both laugh). I grew up in Madison, Illinois. Madison at that time was probably about 7,000-8,000 people. My dad worked as a salesman, selling flour and sugar, making deliveries in East St. Louis, Illinois, in that area. I went to grade school in Madison; I went to high school in Madison.

One of the regrets of my life as a kid was I was an only child. I wouldn't wish that on anybody. It's too lonely a life. So consequently, my good friends were like family to me. They spent a lot of time at our house and vice versa. After high school… High school was the usual; we had sports and studies, et cetera.

But after high school, I worked at a steel mill in Granite City here, for a period of about…oh, about a year. In November of '42, they passed the selective service, passed a law that nineteen year-olds would be drafted. Well, I turned nineteen on the 3rd of November, and I got my first papers a week later. So, on the 9th of February of '43 I was inducted in to the Army at the reception center at Scott Field.[1]

Harbison: You weren't married at the time?

Klyasheff: No, no, I was single.

Harbison: Did you have a girlfriend?

Klyasheff: As much as a nineteen year-old would have, no steady girlfriend, no.

Harbison: So, you were drafted, and you went into the service. What can you recall about your first days in the service?

Klyasheff: My first days in the service, as I said, I was at the reception center at Scott Field, and Scott Field is where they shipped out draftees here, there and everywhere. I ended up staying at Scott Field for probably two to three weeks,

[1] Located in St. Clair County, Illinois, 17 miles east-southeast of downtown St. Louis, Scott Field was one of thirty-two Air Service training camps established after the United States entered World War I in April 1917. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Air_Force_Base)

mainly because, on my record, it showed I was a good typist, and they could use clerical help at the reception center, so they put me to work there. After about two or three weeks I kind of got fed up with just doing typing work, and I asked to be shipped out.

They sent me to basic training, St. Petersburg, Florida, and that was basic training. From basic training, I went to administrative and engineering school at Fort Logan, Colorado. From there I was shipped to the outskirts of Bradley Field, Connecticut. We were billeted in the woods there, and that's where I made my first entry in to the 321st [Field Artillery Regiment].

Harbison: What do you remember about your instructors and your training? Do you think it was effective? Did you have good instructors?

Klyasheff: Now, are you talking about basic training?

Harbison: Yes.

Klyasheff: I earlier thought that somebody knows from nothing about what instructors should have known. In retrospect, I would have to say that they were pretty good.

Harbison: And your military specialty and special training, what kind of training did you receive?

Klyasheff: I had engineering and administrative. This was at Fort Logan. So when I was assigned to the 321st, I ended up in the orderly room. It was a brand new outfit; everybody in there was recently assigned. To fill slots, they made a bunch of us… Well, they made us corporals for about a month, and then they made us sergeants. That's how fast it was.

Harbison: When did you deploy, and how were you shipped overseas?

Klyasheff: We were given a furlough of four days in October to come home. [We] made it back to Connecticut, and from Connecticut we went to Boston, the port of embarkation. We were at the port of embarkation for probably four or five days because it was right before Christmas. Christmas we had off to go to Boston. The next day we loaded on… I guess there were trains at the time that came in at the embarkation center, took us to the boat. This is on the day after Christmas.

So, we got on the boat the 26th of December, probably left the 27th, and went in convoy to England. We actually landed in Gourock, Scotland. From Gourock, Scotland, this introduced us to the ETO [European Theater of Operations]. Our first trip there was… I'm trying to think. Redding, I think, was the name of the English town that we were billeted in. I can't even remember the town because we took over like old warehouses they put us in.

After we left Redding, thereafter we were billeted in "His Majesty's Forest" for the most part, in tents. We ended up in Newcastle on the Tyne, which was a fairly big city on the east coast of England.[2] From there we shipped to various spots in England, training with the aircraft that they had, checking their locations, et cetera. It was some time about… I guess it was the latter part of June, they shipped us to Bournemouth, England, which was a resort city, and we were billeted in fancy mansions. The whole squadron was in this one building, so you could see it was pretty… It was a living quarters that they requisitioned, and we were there for probably two to three weeks. Then we went from there to the port of embarkation.

We were in the port of embarkation maybe two or three days. The one thing I remember about the port of embarkation, they put us on trucks to go to the ship site—and you won't be able to use this in your story, I don't think—but what I remember about that, there was an infantry replacement company behind us, and they came over to see us off. I remember this one guy—I don't know his name; I never saw him before, didn't see him since—but his last comments to us, as we loaded on the truck, he said, "Well, fellows, good luck and good shacking." We went to the boat from there (Harbison laughs). So, that part you can probably skip.

Harbison: So he was a Brit?

Klyasheff: No, no, he was American. These were American replacements that were going over to France.

Harbison: So when you were training in England, you were training specifically for what your unit did?

Klyasheff: When we were in England training, we trained specifically for the job we were to do, once we got to France.

Harbison: Let's talk about that job.

Klyasheff: Okay. Our job… When we supposedly got to France, we were to pick up, on radio, any aircraft fighter planes, for the most part that was lost [and] needed directions to get back to where they were going. We would triangulate directions, give them a heading, told them what heading to take, and that took care of that part of it.

Also, if an infantry company, for example, or battalion, was being approached with enemy tanks or troops in mass, they were free to call us at that table you saw in the picture. I'll explain the table later, but they could call that table and tell us where they were—actually we could triangulate them once they'd start talking to us—and we, in turn, would call any fighter planes

[2] Newcastle upon Tyne is a university city on the River Tyne in northeast England. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newcastle_upon_Tyne)

we had in the area and give them the coordinates of the tanks or whoever they were, coming in. They [fighter pilots] would take off on their own there.

So we had a dual purpose. We took care of our own aircraft. We also took care of any request that the ground forces had, to give them help with air cover.

Harbison: Did you support the 8th Air Force?

Klyasheff: Eighth Air Force?

Harbison: Yes.

Klyasheff: No, strictly the 9th Tactical Air Command [TAC]. That's what we were a part of.

Harbison: Which fighter wing or wings did you support?

Klyasheff: We were with the 9th Tactical Air Command. As a matter of fact, in the discharge papers I've got here, Belgium saw fit to give us the Belgium 40J, that fire hose with the nozzle on there. We got that for support we gave the Belgium people at the time, through our 9th TAC.

Harbison: What aircraft were being supported?

Klyasheff: Primarily this was P-51s [and] P-47s.[3, 4] However, if the 8th Air Force had a problem with a bomber at night or whatever, they could call us too, and we could give them a heading. We ran twenty-four hours a day, that table I showed you a picture of. This was a communications center. In Verviers, we were billeted in what they called the *Palais of Justice*, city hall.

Once we got into the field, when we left there, like when we moved toward Aachen and Remagen, we were billeted in… Circus tents is the best explanation I can give you. We threw up a circus tent; we moved our equipment in there, communications equipment, and we were in business. We had our circus tent, and we had four outposts on either side of us, forward and back, so that we could triangulate calls.

Harbison: Typically, how far back from the front lines would you have been?

Klyasheff: How far would we have been?

[3] P-51, also called Mustang, is a single-seat, single-engine fighter aircraft originally designed and produced by North American Aviation for the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and later adopted by the U.S. Army Air Forces. (https://www.britannica.com/technology/P-51)

[4] The Republic P-47 Thunderbolt is a World War II-era fighter aircraft produced by the American aerospace company Republic Aviation from 1941 through 1945. When fully loaded, the P-47 weighed up to eight tons, making it one of the heaviest fighters of the war. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_P-47_Thunderbolt)

Harbison: How far back? Yeah.

Klyasheff: From our tent we were anywhere from, I would say, two miles to ten miles. While we were in Verviers, the three months, this was when the war was going to end before Christmas, they told us.

Well, Verviers and Aachen are a stone's throw apart. The infantry was ahead of us by maybe seven, eight miles. When the Battle of the Bulge started, those forward units I talked about, we had two of them…[5] One of them in particular was overrun by Germans. The troops there at the unit didn't get captured because they weren't worth taking. All they had was a truck and a few people there. So they by-passed them; they went around them, didn't even bother with them, until after the pushback came, and our units were in American hands again.

Harbison: Did you have a specific job?

Klyasheff: Once we got to Europe, after Normandy, I had the option of staying as an administrative NCO [Noncommissioned Officer]. It was a 502. Or I could transfer to the operations end of it, in a tent. I chose a tent. So, when we got to France I was part of the operations end. In fact, in the picture we've got there—I've got them here too—I was at the table where we got the incoming calls from the field or the incoming calls from the aircraft.

Primarily, as a sergeant, my job was to listen in on the phones and make sure that the officer, the communications officer, got the right information because I copied it down too. But his information was information that went out.

Harbison: Let's talk about arriving in theater, where you debarked and what it was like. Then I guess we can discuss, chronologically, your experience in the Western Theater.

Klyasheff: Okay. Now, we debarked in England or Gourock, Scotland. G-o-u-r-o-c-k, I think it's spelled, Scotland. As soon as we debarked, we got on a train to… What'd I say; it started with a "P"? I'd have to look it up again. We got there, as I say; we were in a huge warehouse at the time, and later we moved in to tents. We were there probably for…oh, a week or two, before we started moving into what I jokingly refer to as His Majesty's Forest, although it wasn't a joke to the English. We were there.

[There's a] side light. One of the women in our church, the Presbyterian Church down here, married a U.S. soldier and came over. She

[5] The Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Ardennes Counteroffensive, was a major German offensive campaign on the Western Front during World War II which took place from 16 December 1944 to 25 January 1945. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Bulge)

knows very well where I stayed because she was raised in that same town. She was a little kid then.

Anyway, when we'd start moving from place to place, the only one I can recall of any consequence was when we moved to Newcastle upon Tyne, which was on the eastern end of England, a fairly big city, several hundred thousand, I think. We were out in the woods then, out of town, in tents again, and we didn't see the inside of a building until we got down to…oh, a resort town there in England; I mentioned it before. That's where we lived in the fancy house for a couple of weeks or better.

Harbison: Right.

Klyasheff: But in between there, we were in tents, we practiced our… There, I was in the orderly room all of our stay in England. I didn't transfer to operations until we got across the channel… Where was I here?

Harbison: I guess what we want to get to is when you arrived in theater.

Klyasheff: In theater. We went in on Utah Beach, and that was a mistake really, a good one, because we were going in on the wrong spot, and this was where General Roosevelt [Teddy Roosevelt, Jr.] was the head of a division. They were the first ones in [on D-Day], and that's when they decided they were in the wrong spot. He said, "We're here. This is where we'll land." So everybody else came into that same spot.

Harbison: What day was that, that you arrived?

Klyasheff: The 327th came in on the 9th of June. The 321st, that I was in theater with, came in about the middle of July. [The D-Day invasion had begun on June 6.] We merged as a unit sometime after that. Once we got through Paris and into Belgium, we merged. As I showed you, my discharge still shows the 321st on it. I've been meaning to go over to the records center, over here on [U.S. Route] 270 to find out just what unit I was with, but I've never made it over there.

Harbison: So, you're on Utah Beach in mid-July and…

Klyasheff: Utah Beach, frankly, we didn't do anything for the first week or two, other than set up our tents and move around a little. The area we landed in was highly mined, but it was also roped off with a tape. So anybody that got hurt, it was his own fault. We stayed there.

Then we started moving when they broke out of France and started the battle for northern France. This is where we started working. We moved up the coast, past Caen, where the British were, went around their part of it, and went toward Paris. Chartres was where we really stopped, which is down below Paris a little. We held there for about two or three weeks or better.

And then, when it got close to Paris, this was already determined that the French—I forget if it was the 1st Division or what it was—the French division were given the job of going through Paris first. I think it was more to placate [then General Charles] de Gaulle than anything, but it worked. So, the first day, de Gaulle took the division through Paris, followed by American divisions.

The second day… Here again, our unit was comprised primarily of radio trucks and two-and-a-half-ton trucks. We went through on the second day, and as I told Steve, that's the first time I felt like a winner since I left high school (laughs).

Harbison: Why was that?

Klyasheff: We had never won a football game when I was in high school, other than beating a little town called Venice. When we got to Paris, the reception we got from the people of Paris—need I say women primarily and men—we felt like winners. We got showered with flowers. Those of us who were willing got showered with kisses. We never did get off the trucks. The trucks kept moving very slowly, but we did get through Paris.

We bivouacked on the outside of Paris in an open field in pup tents. After about two days there, we did start moving up, going through the rest of France, northern France, and into Belgium.

Harbison: Then you were stationed in Belgium, and what was that like?

Klyasheff: We got to Belgium; we went through a day at a time, stop here, stop there, until we got to this town called Verviers. Verviers was a city of 100,000 people. The 321st-327th, both of us, were the first American troops into town, not because we took the town; it's because the [German] infantry and armored went around the town, so they wouldn't… There were no troops there, German troops there. They went around the town, which left us going through the town, and we never left for three months. We stayed there three months.

We set up in the Palais of Justice. We put our table there, that you see in the picture, and our phone setup and everything. Ninth TAC Headquarters was there. We had our outpost units, front and back; they were out in the field. They were anywhere from, I would say, five miles to fifteen miles away from where our headquarters were or our operations center. It had to be that because you get triangulation that way.

Members of the 327th Fighter Control Squadron track the action on the front lines, while the unit is somewhere in Verviers, Belgium in late 1944. Klyasheff is not in this photo.

So, we set up there, and as I say, they had not taken Aachen yet, and Aachen was really a stone's throw from Verviers. We're going to be home by Christmas anyway; that's what we always kept saying. We didn't know about that other part. So, we were there for three months, and about the 15th of December was when the Germans started their counterattack, the Battle of the Bulge.

This was considerably…not considerably—I don't know how many miles it is on a map, but south of us, southeast I guess you would say—and like I say, we had two units that were overrun by…not overrun by, the Germans just by-passed them. They stayed where they were.

Harbison: Infantry units out in the field?

Klyasheff: Our two units out in the field were by-passed by Germans. They were behind German lines.

Harbison: The 321st and the 327th?

Klyasheff: Yeah. They were behind German lines really, and we still had contact with them, which was amazing. But once the Germans got through, they were starting to get too close to Verviers, so the 9th TAC came out, you moved back to Liège, which we did. Kept the same units, all we moved was our tent. In Liège… We left the safety of Verviers, going in to Liège, which was the second most buzz bombed city in Europe at the time.

England still ranked first as the buzz bomb center. Liège ranked second. People have asked me what it's like to hear a buzz bomb or see it. Well, you hear this thing that sounds like a cross between a two-and-a-half-ton truck and a motorboat. You go outside, and you look, and there's this little thing with wings on it flying over you. Every now and then they stop, the

noise, which means they're out of gas. So they come straight down. And as I say, Liège was the second most bombed V-1 [buzz bomb] city in the European Theater.

We had one experience that was forever in my mind. We'd had a building in Liège where we had our operations center; we didn't need the tent in Liège. One day we had the sound to cut out, and a V-1 started down and landed across the street from us, did not explode, because there was a lot of sabotage in the V-1 plants by prisoner labor. So, this thing landed across the street, did not explode, and we squeaked by on that one.

One of our units was at Maastricht, Holland, which we had screwed it in before, and one day we took the radio equipment up to Maastricht. Sergeant Johnson, who is in the picture here, in Weimar, he and I went up in the Jeep to Holland; we took radio parts. No trouble getting to Holland.

Sergeant Klyasheff, on the left, with fellow soldiers at the captured SS headquarters in Weimar, Germany in the spring of 1945. Note the maps of the Pacific theater in the background.

Coming back, we got stopped by a roadblock, American troops, tanks. This guy—a young kid, same age as we were I guess—he wanted to know who we were, where were we going. So we told him, and he said, "Where are you from?" I told him I was from Illinois, and John was from Omaha, Nebraska. I told him I was from Madison, Illinois. And he said, "Okay, what's the main street in Chicago?" I said, "Hell, I don't know the main street in Chicago; I'm from St. Louis, across the river" (Harbison laughs). I said, "I can tell you how to walk to Sportsman's Park because I've done it 1,000 times, but I don't know anything about Chicago." I said, "If you want to know how to get to the Sportsman's Park, I can tell you, step by step."

So, he called a lieutenant out. The lieutenant—I guess he'd been to St. Louis or something—he told us to go on. We took off toward what we thought was the road we came in on, and we drove on this road. The first sign we came to said "Aachen," I think, "8 kilometers." That's not right. We shouldn't have been anywhere near Aachen. They'd changed signs or turned them around. So, we doubled back and took another road going south toward Liège, and we finally got back to Liège.

Harbison: After the Battle of the Bulge, you then started moving toward Germany?

Klyasheff: After the Battle of the Bulge, they took the Remagen Bridge on one day. I was to find out later, a friend of mine who lived down the street from me, was with a field artillery outfit. They were taking their artillery piece across the bridge, and he fell through a hole in the bridge, drowned. That blocked the bridge off.

They put a pontoon bridge up, practically overnight. [It] probably took them a day or so to do it. Two days after they took the bridge, we crossed on the pontoon bridge, with explicit orders—the German still had an air force—we crossed with explicit orders that, if you get strafed by German aircraft, keep going; do not stop. And if your vehicle is disabled, push it off the bridge. Well, we didn't have to worry about that because we got across.

By that time, they had taken Aachen, south of us; Remagen was already in good hands, so we were in German territory when we got across that bridge, in fact even before that. Our first stop, where we stopped in Germany, was a town called Bruhl, B-r-u-h-l. This was on the Rhine River. We stopped there, and I guess everything has its rewards. We got to clear a bunch of houses out, with German occupants, told them, "You've got two hours to get out. Leave your furniture where it is." We took over their houses. We stayed in Remagen for probably a week thereabouts.

Things were going well up front, so we went on up, followed the troops on up, and before you know it we're in Weimar. Weimar was an old SS barracks. We took over a building in the SS barracks; this was still before the 8th of May. On the 8th of May, they declared peace, and the German Air Force start flying in, to an American base there, to surrender.

Some of them would actually shoot their machine guns, strafing, empty their guns, and then land at the air base and surrender. Most of them didn't. Most of them just surrendered. So, when the war ended, we were at Weimar.

Harbison: How did you feel when you learned that the war had ended in Europe?

Klyasheff: Relief. The war ended there. The one thing about Weimar, up the road a little north of Weimar was Buchenwald. This was a concentration camp, as you know. Well, about three or four of us took off, went up to Buchenwald. The 2nd Armored Division had liberated it, but they hadn't cleaned it up because they had plans.

They still had bodies piled on the streets and whatever, the prisoners. The plan that the American Army had: the people in Weimar, the civilians, were marched to Buchenwald, and they were made to bury these people, which was poetic justice, I guess, in a way. So, we were at Weimar for probably, I would say, maybe three or four weeks.

Then, because of the peace treaty that they had with the Russians and them, Weimar ended up in Russian Territory. The Elba River, I think, was maybe fifteen miles straight ahead, and the Russians were going to take from that past Weimar. So, we were sent to Camp Detroit, which was in Reims, France. We went back through Verviers, down to Reims, France.

Harbison: And you just traveled in…?

Klyasheff: Convoy.

Harbison: Convoy?

Klyasheff: Yeah. And we didn't know until we got to Reims, France, that we were scheduled to be in the invasion of Tokyo, which didn't set too well with us. But anyway, we're still walking. So, we went to Reims, France. We probably said it out loud a lot of times, "God bless Harry Truman for dropping the A-bomb" because we were…

The 327th was stationed at Camp Detroit in Laon, France while they waited for the orders to ship to the Pacific for the invasion of Japan during the summer of 1945.

Harbison: How'd you hear about that?

Klyasheff: On the network, G.I. network.

Harbison: So it was a feeling almost of celebration obviously?

Klyasheff: Yeah, it was.

Harbison: Relief.

Klyasheff: Yes, because they surrendered right after that. At that point, we knew we were going down through Marseille to the port of embarkation to be going to the U.S., instead of the other direction.

Harbison: Heading west instead of east.

Klyasheff: West, right (both laugh). We were quite happy about that. We went down, and they came up with that point system. You had to have eighty points to get home immediately. Several of us were stuck with seventy-seven points, so we had to stay on this mountaintop outside of Marseille for…I guess until about October, the end of October.

We were in Marseille, and finally they decided. They took some of us that had lower points, put us in units. I ended up in the 179th Field Artillery Battalion, where I—this is horrible duty—I had a room overlooking the

Gulf…the Mediterranean Ocean about 100 yards from my window. I had nothing to do except eat and walk around town. La Ciotat was the name of the town.

Harbison: How was the food?

Klyasheff: We had Germans cooking for us. The food was great. I was carried on the roles as personnel sergeant major. I didn't even know what it meant at the time, I don't think, but I was personnel sergeant major because I was a 502 spec number. We stayed there for about three weeks.

Before Thanksgiving we moved on to the port of embarkation, back at Marseille, which was about I guess maybe eight to ten miles, and we got onboard ship and came to New York. From New York we went to Fort Dix, and they shipped us to discharge centers closest to us.

Well, J. B.'s right across the river, but the Army being the Army saw fit to send us, the Illinois bunch, to Camp Grant, even though J.B. was only about a street car ride away.

Harbison: What's that stand for, J.B.?

Klyasheff: Oh, Jefferson Barracks.[6]

Harbison: Jefferson Barracks.

Klyasheff: It was a discharge center after the war. So, we went to Camp Grant, and I was discharged on the 8th of December, came home that night, Saturday, walked in the house, and after… My folks had a couple of relatives… In fact, one of the people there was a guy that came over with my dad from Europe. I walked in, and all the greetings went with it. My dad said, "Where did you get out?" I said, "Oh, I got out at Camp Grant." He stopped all of a sudden. He said, "I got out there at Camp Grant on December the 18th," two wars apart. That was my homecoming.

Harbison: How did you get from Camp Grant to…?

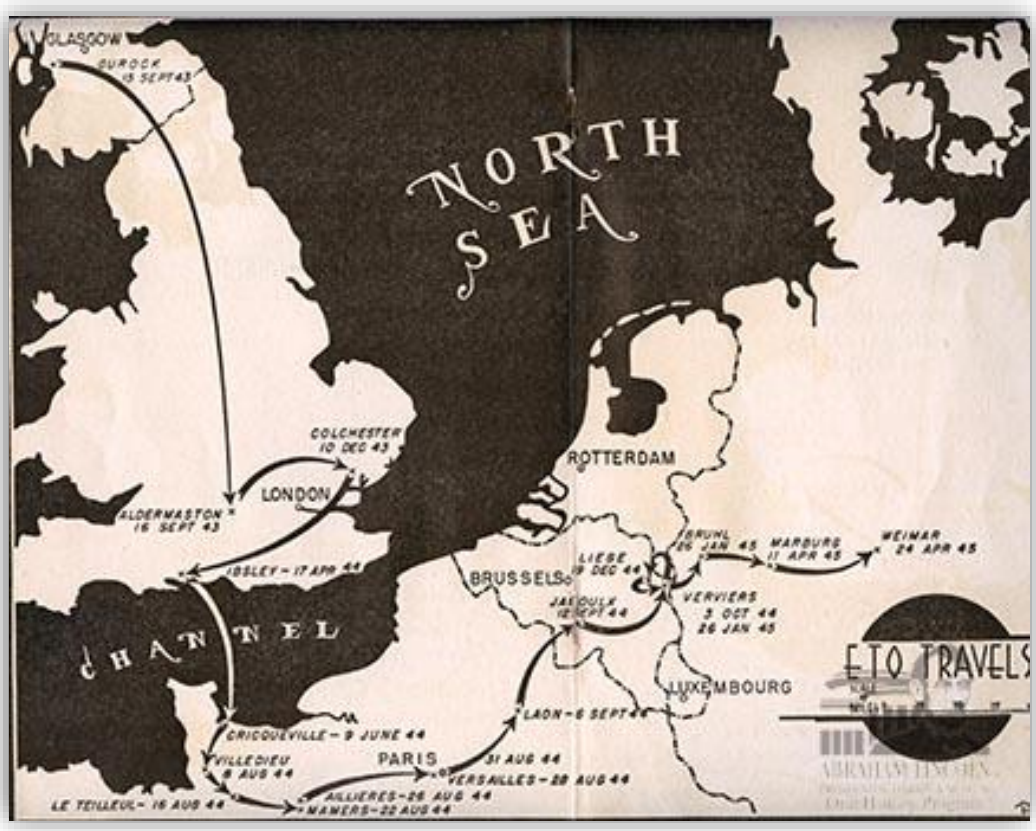
Klyasheff: Train.

Harbison: Let's discuss some general impressions of the service. For example, what did you think about the men you served with in Europe?

Klyasheff: Great. I still have friends… Well, most of them are dead now, but I still have a very good friend. He spends the winters in Sanibel Island, the summers up at Wilmette, Illinois. He and I communicate probably every couple of weeks, by

[6] The Jefferson Barracks Military Post is located on the Mississippi River at Lemay, Missouri, south of St. Louis. It was an important and active U.S. Army installation from 1826 through 1946. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Barracks_Military_Post)

phone or whatever. I know his family because we've met before. The other one lived in Monroe, Michigan. He passed away; I was a pall bearer for him.



This map of the 327th Fighter Control Squadron's route through Europe was included in the unit's own record of their wartime experiences, which was apparently self-published shortly after the unit returned to the United States in December, 1945.

Harbison: Good men.

Klyasheff: Good men.

Harbison: What about the NCO's and officers over you?

Klyasheff: I had no complaints. Of course I was one of the NCO's.

Harbison: How was your unit's morale?

Klyasheff: Morale?

Harbison: Yeah, its ability to do the job, its effectiveness?

Klyasheff: I think we had a good unit. I think we were effective doing what we were supposed to do. I would say morale was good, up until they moved us to France to go to the Pacific. Then it went down for a while.

Harbison: I can imagine. Do you have any opinions about the enemy you faced? And those opinions, how radically did they change after Buchenwald?

Klyasheff: Well, my opinion before was kind of, they're doing what they're going to do, and we're doing what we're going to do. The only Germans I saw really were either across a river, or we couldn't get to them, or they couldn't get to us, or they were riding two-and-a-half-ton trucks, going back to POW [Prisoner-of-War] camp.

I'd say, when we were in Verviers—a two part story here—we had a mess hall in what was an old Catholic school; that was our mess hall. We always ended up cooking more than we needed because most of the G.I.'s, at least a lot of us, went in for seconds and carried it out and dumped it in some kid's tray. He took it home.

Harbison: So, were these K-rations?

Klyasheff: No, K-rations we had… This was regular mess hall food. The only K-rations we had—and I've still got a box downstairs, supper K's—K-rations we got when we got to Normandy. We lived on K-rations for about two weeks, except for Sundays, then they gave us C-rations. [K-rations were lighter than C-rations.]

Harbison: Did you have any favorites?

Klyasheff: Oh yes, yes. Right now I can't remember what it was, but I had favorites (Harbison laughs). I do have a box of K-rations downstairs, unopened.

Harbison: When you were in service, how did you stay in touch with your family?

Klyasheff: Not as often as I should have. I stayed in touch by mail for the most… Well, it was the only way we could. I didn't write as often as I should have written.

Harbison: Did you ever have any leave when you were in Europe, or were you just constantly on the move?

Klyasheff: I had leave in Europe, maybe two or three days at a stretch.

Harbison: What did you do?

Klyasheff: Went to Paris once. When we were in Belgium, I went to Paris. When we were in Germany, in Bruhl, I was fortunate

Bill Klyasheff with Rochelle Michaux. Rochelle's father owned a Catholic meeting hall where Bill and others in the 327th Fighter Control Squadron were billeted during their time in Belgium in the fall of 1944.

enough I got to drive a couple of officers back to Verviers, where they took the Jeep and went to Liège, where their wives were nurses in a hospital. They left me in Verviers because I had a girlfriend, her sister (referring to photo). So I got a couple of days' leave on that. Actually, it wasn't leave; I was on duty, carrying a couple of officers back. But no, my morale… I guess I'm thick or something, but I was in good shape.

Harbison: All right. I think we've touched on pretty much… There are a couple other questions that they ask sometimes. Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events? Did you guys ever pull any pranks on each other?

Klyasheff: Yeah, yeah, I'm trying to think now.

Harbison: So, it wasn't just all…?

Klyasheff: Oh, no, no, we had jokers. I'm trying to think of what some of the stuff was.

Harbison: If you do, you can mention it. For now, I just want to touch on a couple more things, and we'll be done. It's been very interesting. You just told me about some of the friends you made in the service, and you talked about your release at Camp Grant and coming back and finding out your father was also at Camp Grant when he was discharged. What were your feelings when you got back to Granite City? Was it easy coming back and transitioning from the service to civilian life?

Klyasheff: Not really. After I got back I decided I wasn't going to go to look for a job until my mustering out pay ran out. I held that promise. I didn't go to work until the first of April in '46, three months.

Harbison: And what did you do?

Klyasheff: I worked for the government.

Harbison: This was your career after service?

Klyasheff: After I got out of service I went to work [at] the Federal Records Center I was talking about. I went to work for them. But then, after about a year, they started the Army Aviation Center here. Not center, they had another name for it, the Transportation Corp Army Helicopters. I started work for them, and from there we enlarged into Aviation Systems Command. When I retired from the Aviation Systems Command, we had 4,400 people, civilians and military included to some degree.

Harbison: Wow.

Klyasheff: My job in the systems command… I was a JS-13, grade-wise, middle of a fourteen, and my job for the last three years was running the total management system that one of our generals put in. We were always commanded by a two

star general. I kept all the logistical statistics, charts and whatever on how we stand, how we're doing, et cetera. I wrote briefings for the commander. I did that for, oh gosh, fifteen years or better, along with charts and the speeches. In fact, one time I got turned around on that.

I had a commander, a two star general, and he said, "We're having Creighton Abrams come in to visit us."[7] Creighton Abrams happened to be chief of staff at that time. So he said, "I want you to give the briefing on the overall status." I worked for the controller, but my unit worked for the general, or I reported to the general on this park. So I looked at him, and I said, "You want me to do that?" He said, "Yeah, you've written enough of them, you ought to know it." So, I wrote the briefing up, and Creighton Abrams came in. I gave my briefing. It lasted, I think, about a half hour. I guess my knees were knocking; I don't know, but you don't get over that. But that was my job with the Aviation Systems Command.

I retired when I was 55. I had my time in; I could have retired. I knew at the time that they were going to move the Aviation Systems Command to Alabama, and I had my mother here, my wife and three girls, daughters. I didn't want to go to Alabama, and I had time in to retire. So I took retirement. My last day with the Civil Service was the 31st of December, 1978. I retired.

My wife said, "Now what are you going to do?" So, I got a job teaching at the junior college, here in Granite City. It used to be the Belleville Area College, then it became Southern Illinois College. I got a job teaching there three days a week, mornings only, from 9:00 to 12:00. I stayed there for ten years and finally, when I hit 65, my wife said, "Don't you think it's time to retire for good?" So I did.

Harbison: What did you teach?

Klyasheff: I taught personnel management; I taught marketing, and I taught business math three hours every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the most fun job I ever had, loved it. The only trouble was that I wish I had taken it sooner.

Harbison: Just a couple more things. After World War II did you have any thoughts on the Korean War and on Vietnam?

Klyasheff: Yeah, I did. I wasn't against them, but I was against the attitude a lot of people had for the troops. When we came back, all the hullaballoo was over and done with by December. But we came back to a… Well, we were ex-G.I.s then. In fact, I got my degree going to college because of service.

Harbison: So you did go back to college after World War II on the G.I. Bill?

[7] Creighton Williams Abrams Jr. was a United States Army general who commanded military operations in the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1972. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creighton_Abrams)

Klyasheff: Well, I went to night school. I got my degree at night. My wife likes to tell people that I was kind of a slow learner because it took me ten years to get through, but I did go through at night.

Harbison: (laughs) And where'd you go to school?

Klyasheff: Washington University over in St. Louis.

Harbison: In St. Louis, awesome. I know that Steve Leonard, my colleague at the IHPA [Illinois Historical Preservation Agency], wanted you to do this interview, and I'm really glad you did. But why did you agree?

Klyasheff: Why did I what?

Harbison: Agree to do this interview?

Klyasheff: Because of Steve.

Harbison: Because of Steve, good. Thank you, Steve. Do you think your sacrifice during the war was justified and how did the experience change you in your outlook on life? And just to wrap it up, kind of what do we need to remember about war and Americans' involvement?

Klyasheff: Well, did my experience change me? I suppose it did, it had to. It made me grow up real fast. I say that because, when we were in Verviers, living a pretty peaceful life, fighting was five or six miles up the road. Trucks would come by, two-and-a-half-ton trucks, stacked with bodies going up to the American military cemetery. That kind of jars you when you see them. That jarred me. Seeing Buchenwald changed me. Man's inhumanity to man I guess you'd call it, but that changed me.

My attitude, as far as the Army goes, I worked for the Army. My rank… The military… When you're civil service and you work for the military, your rank depends on… Well, for example, I was a GS-13. My equivalent in the Army was a lieutenant colonel. I had majors who worked for me on many occasions. Had I been fourteen, fourteen would have still been a lieutenant colonel. Fifteen would have been a colonel. So, my attitude toward the Army [is], "Hey, I'm with them." They put my kids through college. [It was] my money, but the Army paid me.

I had a good relationship with… We were always commanded by a two star general. I had a good relationship with them, and this helped. So, my experience with the Army is very positive. And it angered the hell out of me when I heard people, some who never set foot in the Army, talking about the G.I.s feeding at the trough. This bugged me.

Harbison: One last question, and since this interview is going to go online, it will be available for as long as we're around, Do you have any advice or wisdom you could pass on to future generations?

Klyasheff: Do I have any advice or wisdom? The only thing I can say is just to take each day at a time. I could have gone in the Army complaining, and it wouldn't have done any good. I went in with an attitude of, "You tell me what to do, and that's it." I got to the point where I was telling people what to do, so it was a good learning experience. My experience with the Army helped me immeasurably in the jobs I've had after that, both the civil service job and the school job. So, I'm all in favor of kids putting in a stint.

Harbison: Right. Thank you very much.

(end of transcript)