

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Clayton “Clyde” J. Coenen
Lead Bombardier, Air Force, World War II.

2000

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Coenen, Clayton J., (1916-2009). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Clayton "Clyde" Coenen, an Appleton, Wisconsin resident, discusses his service in the Air Force as a lead bombardier with the 47th Bomber Group during World War II. Coenen mentions he graduated from high school in 1937, and then attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he played football from 1938 to 1939. Coenen states he enlisted in the Air Force in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) in 1942 and passed a written test to attend pilot school. He touches upon pre-flight training in Santa Ana (California) and pilot training in King City (California). He tells of his first flight on a Cessna aircraft and how a turning mistake forced him to leave pilot school. Coenen qualified for bombardier-navigation training instead and spent six months in bombardier school in Victorville (California) and navigation school in Carlsbad (New Mexico). He touches upon learning in the AT-11 aircraft and using the Norden bombsight. Coenen reports his first assignment was to be a bombardier instructor for cadets in Childress (Texas). He spent a year teaching cadets, which was a "very strenuous deal because we flew four missions a day, seven days a week." Coenen jokes he eventually asked to be sent overseas. In July 1943, Coenen joined the 47th Bomber Group based in Lavenham (England). Throughout the interview, he references several types of aircraft including: AT-11, B-17, B-24, P-38, and P-51. Coenen mostly flew in B-17s. He reports twenty-five missions were required for an airman to be sent home, and he had completed twenty-four when the war in Europe ended. Next, Coenen outlines a typical mission; as lead bombardier, he would wake up at 4:30 a.m. for target study. Missions over Germany lasted six to eight hours and took place every eight to ten days. As lead bombardier, Coenen rode in the lead plane at the head of a formation of thirty-six or forty-eight aircraft and was responsible for dropping smoke signals telling other planes when to drop their bombs. Coenen remarks that during bombing, the bombardier had control of the plane because the bombsight was connected to the automatic pilot and would adjust the position of the airplane according to the target. Once the bombs were dropped, Coenen states the pilot took the controls again and each plane "peeled off" separately to escape enemy fire and anti-aircraft flak. Coenen contrasts German fighters with German jets, which often gave them trouble, but he emphasizes most injuries came from shrapnel and from flak. Coenen recalls a couple close calls in combat; his gunner was hit by flak, and his radioman lost his oxygen mask and fainted. Coenen also shows the interviewer a large piece of flak metal he saved as a souvenir that hit his B-17 and knocked Coenen off his stool, injuring his shoulder. Coenen explains that after a mission, the crew always critiqued and rated their performance. Next, Coenen touches upon military and social life. He mentions the Red Cross provided food after missions and the airmen could buy alcohol from the Officers Club. Coenen also addresses relations with British civilians in

London and Lavenham. He comments that older British men complained about the Americans, but that most British people were “generally pretty decent.” Coenen tells a story of American airmen turning over a taxi in London after the cab driver refused to accept their tip and insulted them. Coenen describes staying at a USO dormitory in London that was shaken by a German buzz bomb. He also mentions his crew listened to radio broadcasts by “Axis Sally” who had a lot of intelligence about the American military positions and would name soldiers and airmen in individual units. Coenen describes a few specific missions; he flew over Ardennes (Belgium) in the Battle of the Bulge and bombed Berlin and Marburg (Germany). He also reveals he was in the first plane with the 1st Air Force during the bombing of Dresden. Finally, Coenen mentions that he participated in a secret mission to drop napalm on Germans holding out in Bordeaux (France) after V-E Day; however, he admits his memory of that time is shaky, stating: “sometimes I think it’s a dream, sometimes I think it’s absolutely true.” After the war ended, Coenen went on leave and was discharged in October 1945. He married shortly after the war and used the G.I. Bill to finish college at the University of Wisconsin. After college, Coenen went to work for Fitzpatrick Lumber Company in Madison (Wisconsin). He states he eventually became a lumber broker and started his own lumber distribution company. Coenen was a life member of the American Legion and attended several reunions of the 47th Bomb Group.

Biographical Sketch:

Coenen (1916-2009) was born in DePere, Wisconsin and grew up in Menasha, graduating high school in 1937. He played football for the University of Wisconsin for two years before joining the Air Force in 1942. Coenen served as a bombardier instructor in Childress (Texas) until 1943 when he was deployed to Lavenham (England). Coenen was the lead bombardier on twenty-four combat missions over Germany and central Europe and participated in the Battle of the Bulge, the Battle of Berlin, and the bombing of Dresden. In October 1945, he was discharged with a rank of first lieutenant. After the war, he graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in geology and went to work for Fitzpatrick Lumber Company first in Madison (Wisconsin) and later in Iowa. Coenen eventually settled in Appleton (Wisconsin). He was a member of the American Legion for over fifty years and earned the European War Medal, the Air Medal, and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed by unknown, n.d.

Transcription edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010

Interview Transcript:

Jim: And it's the 20th of September in the year of 2000. You entered military service when, sir?

Clyde: In April of 1942.

Jim: Okay, and where did you go?

Clyde: I swore in in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Jim: Did you enlist in the Air Force?

Clyde: Yes.

Jim: And your first experience in the Air Force was where?

Clyde: I went to Santa Ana, California for pre-flight training and went on to pilot training at King City, California.

Jim: How did you get into the pilot groove right off the bat? Did you pass a test?

Clyde: I qualified with a written test or whatever.

Jim: Your eyesight was okay?

Clyde: Everything was fine. Right, right.

Jim: And your first flying experience was with a Piper Cub or a Cessna of some kind?

Clyde: What was it called again? A Cessna Training.

Jim: So how was that experience?

Clyde: Well, it was very good, I was doing real fine, except one day an instructor told me to make a 30 degree turn, and I banked the plane about 30 degree, just slipped around, and that was enough to end my pre-flight training.

Jim: That's as far as you got – they had some other plans for you then?

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: So they told you you were going to be a bombardier?

Clyde: Well, I had to take another test, and I qualified then for bombardier-navigation.

Jim: Did you do both the navigating and the bombing?

Clyde: No, just the bombing. But I instructed cadets before I went into the bombing for several years.

Jim: Where did you get the bombing training?

Clyde: At Victorville, California.

Jim: Okay, and how long was that training?

Clyde: I trained at Victorville for, I would say, about six months. Then went on to navigation school at Carlsbad, New Mexico.

Jim: Bombardier training – what kind of an aircraft did you use for that?

Clyde: AT-11.

Jim: Was that difficult to learn?

Clyde: To learn the bombing?

Jim: Yes.

Clyde: Well, I guess everybody has a knack for something. [Laugh.] Anyhow, you do what they tell you to do, and that's about it. Right.

Jim: I see. I didn't know how difficult that was for somebody -- how many washed out and that sort of stuff.

Clyde: Well, there's plenty, there's plenty – There's precision to it. And the longer you're trained on it, the better you become. That's why when I went overseas I had all this back-up training – I was the lead bombardier on most of my missions.

Jim: Excellent. You must've gotten high ratings right off the bat.

Clyde: Well, whatever.

Jim: When you stayed to be an instructor, they must have thought you had full grasp of what needed to be done.

Clyde: Yes, I had a very good idea of the basics of the bombsight and all.

Jim: Did you use the Norden bombsight right off the bat?

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: Was that – That was always thought to be very secret, that early in the war – did they protect that in any special way?

Clyde: Oh, yeah. When I took it from the vault, there were two men with guns, with side-arms, who assisted the guy carrying the bombsight.

Jim: The bombsight – one man could carry it easily?

Clyde: It was in a kind of leather bag.

Jim: Then you would install it in place on the aircraft?

Clyde: And I would set it in one particular place, on one of the gyroscopes. The horizontal gyroscope.

Jim: But when you got overseas, though, you didn't take it out every day? Just once at night?

Clyde: No, no.

Jim: That was just –

Clyde: While we were in training.

Jim: And, you say, training went on six months?

Clyde: Yeah, I went through training – I'd say four to six months.

Jim: And when did you join a squadron?

Clyde: No, then I went to college down in New Mexico. And there I took navigation, and from there I went to Childress, Texas, where I instructed cadets in bombing. I instructed cadets for, oh, I'm sure a year-and-a-half or so.

Jim: Using the same aircraft, or using a B-17, by this time?

Clyde: No, a school AT-11. Bombing in the desert, bombing on targets drawn out in the desert. The thing about training the cadets –it was a very strenuous deal, because we flew four missions a day, seven days a week, over and over and over. So finally I asked to go overseas, really.

Jim: You were bored to death with this, I'm sure.

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: Most of the kids do pretty well, though?

Clyde: Yeah, generally. I only lost two or three I think.

Jim: So then you decided you were going to make a move, and when was that? You recall when you went overseas?

Clyde: I went overseas, let's see, it would have been probably in July of 1943.

Jim: What was your squad over there?

Clyde: Went to the 47th Bomber group.

Jim: And that was stationed in England, I assume?

Clyde: Yes.

Jim: Where in England were you?

Clyde: Lavenham, Suffolk County.

Jim: Oh, I know about where that is. So was that a pretty nice base, or pretty sparse or what?

Clyde: It was a nice base. Actually, it was a quiet little town – very quaint. In fact, today it's a very good tourist town.

Jim: I'll bet. Is the base still there?

Clyde: The base is still there, owned by an Englishman. What's his name? He owned the farm where the base is built on, and he pretty much kept up the runways. Now it broken up and there's grass grown up between them.

Jim: And at that base was your squadron and what else?

Clyde: Our bomb group was there. Yeah, the 47th Bomb Group.

Jim: And how many airplanes are we talking about?

Clyde: That flew at one time?

Jim: That were stationed there.

Clyde: Oh, I'd say ninety.

Jim: All 17s?

Clyde: All 17s, right.

Jim: Did you ever fly a 24?

Clyde: I flew in a 24.

Jim: That's what I meant.

Clyde: That's at EAA [Experimental Aircraft Association and museum based in Oshkosh, Wisconsin].

Jim: How many missions when you got there were you required to complete?

Clyde: Twenty-five.

Jim: That was twenty-five?

Clyde: Right.

Jim: I know they changed it later. They upped it later towards the end of the war. And you completed your twenty-five missions?

Clyde: Right. Well, I think the war ended when I was there. I had twenty-three, twenty-four.

Jim: Close to finishing. Right. Same aircraft?

Clyde: Same aircraft, B-17.

Jim: That one piece of metal you showed me was the only serious damage that it had?

Clyde: Oh, no. We've been hit other times.

Jim: But not with a big chunk like that.

Clyde: No. That was something else.

Jim: That's impressive! Could have taken your head right off.

Clyde: It went right over my shoulder. At the same time, it knocked over a stool – piece of flak had hit me here and –

Jim: Generally, your flights were to Germany from your base?

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: And how often did you fly? What was your schedule, in other words?

Clyde: Well, generally, depending upon weather and, I suppose, reconnaissance and everything that was involved, we maybe flew at an average of once every eight to ten days. On average.

Jim: So in your free time, could you leave the base?

Clyde: When you had a leave, when you had permission.

Jim: And where would you go generally – to the town right next door?

Clyde: No, no. Well, we could go next door [to town] any time. We could leave and go there any time. But to go into London, you had to have a special pass.

Jim: How did you get along with the local folks?

Clyde: Well, they were generally pretty decent people, some of them. Just like anywhere else – you find good people and bad people, you know.

Jim: The older men started resenting it?

Clyde: Yes.

Jim: Just like the in books.

Clyde: Yes, they'd sit around--

Jim: --and complain; they're all veterans of the First War.

Clyde: Yeah [Laughs]. Right.

Jim: So you probably didn't get too chummy with them?

Clyde: No, not too chummy. The other guys were general pretty good – sometimes they'd get a little rowdy, but you know –

Jim: But you had— Was liquor available to you anywhere else other than that town – other than London?

Clyde: Well, we had it at the Officers Club.

Jim: They had it in the Officers Club, right. And so you really didn't have to go into town if you wanted a drink?

Clyde: No. Unless you were stood down. If you were stood down because you were going to fly the next day, don't drink and no – The Officers Club was closed. If you were stood down the next day. If our group was flying the next day –

Jim: Generally how many planes flew at the same time?

Clyde: Generally, either – Always 36, three squadrons, and sometimes 48 – a diamond squadron would fly. From our group.

Jim: And you were chosen to be the lead bombardier in that group?

Clyde: Well, not – you didn't lead every mission. I never flew with the same crew – they passed the lead bombardier around to different crews.

Jim: Oh, that was different than most guys.

Clyde: I was with my own crew the first – the ones I went over with. Maybe the first four or five missions.

Jim: Yeah, you didn't write down what that bomber group was – 47th – Right, I see it now. Now was that a problem, being with different crews all the time?

Clyde: Not necessarily. They pretty much – They loved the privilege of being the lead crew.

Jim: They liked that?

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: They really soared in on them. [Laughs] You were treated like bad news?

Clyde: Yep, pretty much.

Jim: So you traveled in groups of twelve. You spotted for the other eleven airplanes?

Clyde: For the whole group.

Jim: Oh, for the whole group?

Clyde: We'd carry a smoke bomb, and when our plane dropped that smoke bomb, every toggle their bombs, everybody else.

Jim: And it unloaded at the same moment?

Clyde: Right. The minute they saw that smoke, they'd toggle.

Jim: And then start heading for home. When you do the “head for home” movement, was that individual?

Clyde: No, no. Once you hit the target, you immediately peeled off. You thought your stomach was going to end up in your throat.

Jim: ‘Cause you dropped so much?

Clyde: Yeah, and –

Jim: Was that to gain speed?

Clyde: To get out of the flak.

Jim: What about enemy aircraft?

Clyde: Well, it wasn’t too bad when we just had the fighters, but when we got the jets against us, it was kind of rough.

Jim: The 262s came to your airplane?

Clyde: The German jets.

Jim: The 262s.

Clyde: Or whatever they were. [Laughs.]

Jim: That’s what they were.

Clyde: Anyhow, they’d come out head-on – you could see the specs. I had the chin-guns but they didn’t do you any good, by the time the spec was there, it was through your formation!

Jim: Nobody shot down one of those?

Clyde: I don’t know if any of those was shot down.

Jim: I’ve interviewed a P-21 pilot who shot one down.

Clyde: Oh, is that right?

Jim: Yeah, that was quite an honor, because in order to catch them, you had to get them at an angle.

Clyde: Yeah, they’re something else.

Jim: How about the others – Messerschmitt and Focke-Wulf 190?

Clyde: Well, my principal job was to bomb the target, and I had the chin-guns, but never had really a lot of training in gunnery, but the turret I've had — I controlled from up above. I sat above the turret.

Jim: But you were really concentrating on something else.

Clyde: Yes, I had no time to worry about —

Jim: The plane was wounded many times or a couple of times — tell me about that.

Clyde: Well, we had a radioman, little Jewish fellow — he'd give us a lot of trouble. He got hit once. In fact, it was kind of my job when I wasn't on bomber. Wherever there was a problem, the pilot would send me to check it out. Anyhow, this little Jewish fellow, he didn't answer my check — we'd check everyone out every twenty minutes by intercom — so the pilot told me to go back and check on him. Well, what had happened is he lost his oxygen mask. And he was laying across the desk. He had wet his pants, was frozen. I got the mask back on him, brought him back.

Jim: He was okay then?

Clyde: Right. And we had one gunner that was hit. But the flak was the biggest problem. You know, on a bombing run, which lasted a fair amount of time, because as you approach the target, you're looking out like this. And as you approach the target, the telescope on the bombsight goes like this — you keep it in your sights. And then you keep correcting both laterally and the rate that keeps the cross-hairs on the target. Well, you didn't see the target to start with, but you have checkpoints along the way.

Jim: As the initial bomber, how did you know where to drop that bomb?

Clyde: Well, we got up about 4:30 in the morning, when we were on a mission. Then you go to breakfast, then you'd go to target study, then you go to Lead KUD [?] training.

Jim: Right. But if it was overcast, then what?

Clyde: If it was overcast, you'd hope to get an opening in the overcast.

Jim: Did you do it by timing? You knew that it was going to be right because of a certain amount of time on your watch?

Clyde: Right. And you had a pretty good idea because of the checkpoints along the way. So when you actually got on the target itself, of course that's when you got the flak.

Jim: That's when it would seem it would be difficult for you if there were clouds beneath you.

Clyde: Well, then we have a micky operator – if it was clouded over, then he'd drop by radar.

Jim: What's a micky operator?

Clyde: Well, that's what they call them. He was a radar operator – he flew in the lead ship.

Jim: The rest of the planes didn't have that?

Clyde: No.

Jim: How long was your bombing run generally? Once you got locked in, was that about 12 minutes, 14 minutes?

Clyde: Well, from the initial point – they set up an initial point and took a certain hitting off that. And from the initial point to the target – it varied, but I'd say it averaged 15-18 minutes.

Jim: And you had control of the airplane at that time?

Clyde: Right. Except air speed and altitude

Jim: The pilot –

Clyde: He took RSPs [?] and altitude. Other than that –

Jim: – changes sideways –

Clyde: Right. And drift and everything was taken care of by –

Jim: How could you control that in the bombardier seat?

Clyde: It was controlled by keeping the hairs on the, in other words –

Jim: But how did that make the plane stabile?

Clyde: Through the automatic pilot. The bombsight went through the automatic pilot.

Jim: Change the bombsight, the automatic pilot changes back.

Clyde: Right, change the course and correct for drift or whatever.

Jim: So the hairy moments were those eighteen minutes.

Clyde: Right. Of course, there were usually some surprises along the way sometimes.

Jim: Like what?

Clyde: Well, you get a few flaks. When you're on a bomb run, you're going near someplace they're afraid you're going to hit them, and they bomb.

Jim: Were you worried about other aircraft?

Clyde: What? Fighter aircraft?

Jim: No, other B-17s? Or was that their problem? Of course if you're the lead aircraft, that wasn't your problem – it was their problem.

Clyde: Well, everybody, as you flew in formation – The formation was to keep yourself safe from fighter. There wasn't much flak, but the flak was there regardless.

Jim: Did the pilot adjust up and down, depending on the concentration of the flak?

Clyde: Well, it's too late for that.

Jim: This is it – right or wrong, this is the way we've got to go. And once the bombs are released, then you're disconnected from the bombsight, so the pilot had total control again?

Clyde: Right, yes, once we close the bomb base –

Jim: 'Cause they slow you down.

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: Do you have more trouble with the fighters on the bomb run than afterward.

Clyde: No, they could attack you at any time over enemy territory.

Jim: Tell me about the protective cover of our planes.

Clyde: Our fighters, yes.

Jim: But towards the end of the war, the 51s already took over that job.

Clyde: Right, right, they were very good.

Jim: They must have saved a lot.

Clyde: Yeah, I liked the P-38s because I thought they were great to watch.

Jim: Did they fly cover for you for some time?

Clyde: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Jim: That was a fast airplane.

Clyde: It was a double-womb [?], you know.

Jim: Yes. It was Richard Balder's airplane.

Clyde: Yeah, I liked that.

Jim: He was our Wisconsin hero.

Clyde: Right, right.

Jim: Well, that's good. As long as they were around, you weren't bothered by enemy fighters, right?

Clyde: Well, you could see them with their dogfights, you know. But it wasn't necessarily on a bomb run that the fighters were there. They'd attack you anyplace, you know.

Jim: When you turned to go home, you generally flew lower then, once you got away from the flak?

Clyde: Well, once the bombs were dropped, the pilot would just peel it off, you know. He really –

Jim: – start running.

Clyde: – start gulping, because [the Jerries?] were working on you, you know?

Jim: Oh, I see. The sudden drop. What was his objective?

Clyde: To get out of the flak.

Jim: You mean the flak was geared for a higher level?

Clyde: Yeah. It was set for the altitude that you're –

Jim: So that would give [unintelligible] and you'd be safer, because of [unintelligible]
Did they ever bother with smaller arms like 50 caliber from the ground?

Clyde: No, not much.

Jim: And getting home? The plane was always intact for you? You never had any serious problem getting home from your missions.

Clyde: We landed in France one time with a bad plane. But, you know, France was free at that time. And we were back at base the next day.

Jim: The plane was just not functioning well enough?

Clyde: We had some holes in her and some sputtering.

Jim: Well, this ten-pound piece of metal – what was that?

Clyde: That was a piston from another piece of B-17 that was hit.

Jim: Hit pretty bad if it –

Clyde: Yeah, it was – it went down, yeah.

Jim: I'll get that – we'll put that on camera.

Clyde: That's a piston.

Jim: That's melted from the explosion?

Clyde: No, you can see –

Jim: I'll hold it up so you can describe it.

Clyde: You can see this here was where the connecting rod came through, somewhat like this. Here's some rings – this is where the rings of the piston were. You can see that. It's pretty heavy stuff. And pretty jagged in places.

Jim: Did you ever weigh that piece?

Clyde: No, I didn't.

Jim: It's true – it looks like a seven pounder.

Clyde: That one went right over my right shoulder. [Laugh.] But you can see what damage they do when they hit the vital parts of an airplane.

Jim: Yes, I can see that. Now that was just on your way home or on your bombing run when they hit you?

Clyde: I had already done the bombing – it was after we got off the bombing run.

Jim: That's when you got the piece of flak in your shoulder?

Clyde: Right, same time.

Jim: Did that go through or just?

Clyde: Just hit the –

Jim: Oh, it didn't go in?

Clyde: No, I had a flak suit on. Hit here and bounced off and left my arm black and blue.

Jim: Oh, my. That was lucky, I'd say.

Clyde: I'm lucky to be here, I'll tell you.

Jim: So that was the closest you came to meeting your maker?

Clyde: Right. That was it. He figured I was a good guy, might as well live another –

Jim: So did that thing do much damage to the inside of your plane?

Clyde: What?

Jim: That big piece of metal.

Clyde: Well, it knocked the nose off.

Jim: And then it sort of lodged against one of the walls.

Clyde: On the floor behind me. In fact, I went off when the flak hit me – it knocked me off the stool. And I dropped right on that seat on my back. And I'm hollering at the pilot, "I'm hit! I'm hit!" I thought it went right through me – the flak. [?]

Jim: Oh my. So there was not much you could do then. Did they send the copilot down to check on you?

Clyde: They sent the engineer. He was the guy coming the other way.

Jim: He found that you were still alive?

Clyde: Right. He sent me down there. By that time I was back on the stool – I could have died three times by the time he got there.

Jim: So otherwise your plane suffered minor damage from the flak? Just a little hole here and there and that kind of stuff? That was very common [?].

Clyde: Yeah, very common. But you could hear that flak: kuff, kuff, kuff! Even over the roar of the engines.

Jim: So when you got back to base, did you get any time off for that?

Clyde: Not necessarily, no.

Jim: They weren't impressed, right?

Clyde: No. [Laugh.]

Jim: Generally after you got back from a mission, what happened then?

Clyde: Well, when I got back from a mission, the Red Cross generally was there.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Jim: Oh, really?

Clyde: Yeah.

Jim: Just the officers?

Clyde: Right.

Jim: That's what I thought. [Laugh.]

Clyde: It was a little –

Jim: They gave it to you or they'd sell it to you?

Clyde: No, they gave it to you.

Jim: Okay.

Clyde: One shot.

Jim: Well, you had booze in the Officers Club.

Clyde: Which you actually had to buy.

Jim: Ah, alright. Then the debriefing. What did that entail?

Clyde: Well, everybody told their story about what they experienced, pretty much.

Jim: Did you do that individually, or did all of the guys in your plane sit around and –

Clyde: Well, they had the whole group there as a group.

Jim: Oh, they did it as a group. Not as individuals.

Clyde: They'd call it a critique.

Jim: So everybody'd get a chance to speak, or they were required to, or only if they wanted to say something?

Clyde: Only if they wanted to say something. And they tried to hold that to military deals and not personal deals.

Jim: I understand. And then they give you a rating on your mission and tell you how well you did, according to what they planned for you?

Clyde: Well, I have got some things around that shows some of the results on my missions.

Jim: That chart you showed me.

Clyde: That was my whole group. I have some chart around that shows personally how I rated.

Jim: You seem to rate pretty high then, according to that.

Clyde: Well, I got the EFC for being efficient under rugged fire.

Jim: Right, well that's wonderful. I'm sure you deserved it.

Clyde: Yeah. Thank you.

Jim: And you got mustered out in Air Medals – everybody got those.

Clyde: Yeah, they handed them out every five missions.

Jim: Every five you got extra star in your –

Clyde: Muster.

Jim: After five missions?

Clyde: Right.

Jim: And you put in your twenty-three missions by the end of the war?

Clyde: Twenty-seven. No, twenty-three.

Jim: You said you were just short of your – They required twenty-five, and the war ended before you could finish ‘em. So the 47th did well, and their experience is –

Clyde: We had a very good record.

Jim: – as good as any other bomb group.

Clyde: Actually General Castle on Christmas Eve of ‘43, it would have been, he flew – he was in the Battle of the Bulge – I wasn’t on that mission. But he was killed on it. He was an air leader. We always had an air leader – it was either a full colonel or a general. I would fly lead. Especially if it was a division league or –

Jim: So – Okay. Tell me about time off in London. What did you do?

Clyde: Well, what everybody else did.

Jim: What everybody else did is not something you want to discuss with your wife.

Clyde: Right. Pretty much so. [Laugh.] Yeah, it was quite –

Jim: –wild. Pretty wild. You managed to stay out of trouble, though?

Clyde: One of the wildest deals though – I guess it was Doc Seebecker -- he was our surgeon here in Madison.

Jim: Carl Seebecker? I know him. He’s dead now.

Clyde: Good buddy of mine. He was in our 487.

Jim: Oh, really?

Clyde: He was flight surgeon.

Jim: Oh, yeah, I see. He used to give anesthesia for me in many surgical cases.

Clyde: Is that right?

Jim: Oh, sure.

Clyde: Good guy.

Jim: Yep. Excellent guy.

Clyde: Anyhow, he used to go to London with our crew, you know, whoever – well, basically I was pals with my basic crew I went over with. But I'd fly with any crew.

Jim: I understand.

Clyde: Well, anyhow, we were in London one time, and we had ridden a cab with those big high wheels, you know, square.

Jim: Yeah, Austin.

Clyde: Anyhow, he – We got off and we tipped the cab driver what we figured was a pretty good tip. And he looks at it, and he says, "You damn Yanks!" and he throws it on the ground. And the crew [?] on the curb and they come right over and tip the cab on its side. [Laughs]

Jim: Oh, really? Well, that helped – made it a little better.

Clyde: Yeah. [Laughs.] It was one of those things you would never forget.

Jim: It's not. So what did he do – just start screaming and looking for a cop, I suppose?

Clyde: Yeah. Well –

Jim: Not much you could do.

Clyde: There was nothing he could do really.

Jim: Well, that gave you a great deal of satisfaction, I'm sure. Did you find decent places to eat there in London, or was it pretty slim pickings?

Clyde: Well, the big deal was a fish and chips on a piece of newspaper.

Jim: Right. That's really not great eating,

Clyde: No.

Jim: And did you drink a lot of the beer from the pubs?

Clyde: Oh, yeah. The –

Jim: Did you learn to like the warm beer?

Clyde: Well, that was quick if you didn't get anything else.

Jim: There was no chance, no other option.

Clyde: "Quick" is a good English term too. [Laughs.]

Jim: But if you were going to spend an overnight, where would you stay in London?

Clyde: Well, USO we stayed sometimes. They had provisions, but just dormitory type. Yeah. In fact, a V-2 hit close to that USO once when we were in London and shook the whole building.

Jim: So you had the chance to experience the other side of one of those –

Clyde: We heard them come over too – come over the base, and the buzz bombs too.

Jim: Strange airplane – that buzz bomb. That bup-bup [?] engine.

Clyde: When it stopped, that's when it was going to drop.

Jim: Right. And you headed for the basement.

Clyde: Right.

Jim: Or the tomb.

Clyde: Yep.

Jim: So your free time then was pretty enjoyable? Wouldn't you say. Of course, it was full of Americans all the time.

Clyde: It was fine, it was great. Good relief.

Jim: Certainly. Any decent music to listen to? Or just American records on jukebox?

Clyde: We used to listen to Axis Sally in the morning before we went on missions. Before breakfast usually.

Jim: To tell you where you were going that day?

Clyde: She'd say: "You guys are too good guys to be tied up in that outfit."

Jim: She'd name people?

Clyde: "Land at this place." Oh, yeah, they had a lot of –

Jim: They really knew what was going on.

Clyde: But we used to have a radio when we got up for every mission, anyhow.

Jim: Generally you left in the morning at eight or nine or a little later?

Clyde: Earlier than that.

Jim: About seven or six, something like that?

Clyde: Well, we ate breakfast at 4:30, and then we had target study and BQ [?] briefing. And then – It was still dark, I know. We'd be setting up on the [harness?] stand.

Jim: And it was about six hours to the target, ordinarily? Roughly?

Clyde: Well, if we were flying to Berlin and Dresden, it was a further amount than that.

Jim: That was longer. It would be eight hours out and eight hours back.

Clyde: Yeah, long time.

Jim: That's a long time to be cooped up, isn't it?

Clyde: Right. Coldest I ever say it up there was [?] things got blowing through the nose.

Jim: Yeah, that would drop the temperature, wouldn't it?

Clyde: Yeah, it was 78 below.

Jim: You had a thermometer there?

Clyde: Yeah.

Jim: You can get frostbite from –

Clyde: Yeah, they use the temperature that's part of the setting on the bombsight.

Jim: Oh, I see.

Clyde: Yeah, there are several things to set on the bombsight before you even started to go.

Jim: That was what, besides temperature?

Clyde: Ah, temperature, trail – what they call trail.

Jim: What's trail?

Clyde: That's the distance your bomb would drop behind the airplane, after you've –

Jim: Sure. What else?

Clyde: Well –

Jim: Well, height, of course, you're up in the air.

Clyde: Yeah, altitude. We had that.

Jim: What about the speed of the aircraft?

Clyde: That was taken care of with your synchronization.

Jim: Did they throttle down on the final run? The bomb run? Or did they try to go full blast, full bore forward?

Clyde: Didn't make any difference, 'cause --

Jim: You only had one speed?

Clyde: Well, they set a speed, but I think it would be faster than your normal speed over there. It's going to be a little faster to get the hell out of there.

Jim: Sure. So when did you leave England? Right after the war?

Clyde: Well, I'll tell you. It was a strange thing. Let's see, if I remember the chronological order. I know that Roosevelt died –

Jim: -- in April.

Clyde: -- and I forget what that last [battle?] was.

Jim: In May the European war ended, so that was a month later.

Clyde: Right. Then – I remember now. We were scheduled to leave for home. And we had packed all our clothes and our personal things. Packed everything on the airplane – everything had to go except what we had on. And that May, and we never left there til July. So we had to watch those posts. Nobody gets on that

airplane once it's packed. And that's it. So we wore the same clothes for two months.

Jim: Well, that's typical efficiency, right?

Clyde: But when we landed at Westover Field on the way home in Massachusetts, we got off, sat on the tarmac out there for three or four hours. Meantime, somebody took the airplane – flew it off to get it melted down. We sat there [?] the irony of it. Waited for a ride.

Jim: A truck ride back to the base? You sat out on the tarmac for three hours?

Clyde: Yeah, and the airplane was already gone, to be melted down. We didn't know where it went.

Jim: You flew it back in formation? Did you go through Greenland, Labrador and down?

Clyde: Yeah, Goosebay, Labrador and –

Jim: Did you navigate that plane?

Clyde: No, I didn't, no.

Jim: Alright. So then were you discharged relatively soon after you got back to the United States?

Clyde: Well, I had accumulated quite a bit of leave, so I was in until October of 1945.

Jim: So you took leave before your discharge?

Clyde: Yeah, but I was amazed. After the discharge I had service til 1947, because I was in the reserve.

Jim: Oh, I see. When you came back, did you use your GI bill?

Clyde: Yes, I had been at the University of Madison two years before the war.

Jim: Just a general course?

Clyde: Yeah. I was in Phi Beta before the war – I had played football

Jim: At Wisconsin? Did you?

Clyde: We lived in the bush. That was before the war. And at Truax Field –

Jim: So you played for Stu [Harry Stuhldreher] there?

Clyde: Right.

Jim: I know a lot of guys who did that.

Clyde: He brought a bunch of guys himself from Pennsylvania. I played, well, when I was a freshman, Holly Weiss was a senior. Fred Benz. They were seniors. They were All-Americans.

Jim: Yeah, I watched them play. I probably watched you and didn't know it.

Clyde: Yeah, as a guard.

Jim: Guards don't get a lot of attention. [Laughs.] Only if something goes wrong.

Clyde: I know you get attention when the other guard pulls out the wrong way, coming together behind the center. [Laugh.]

Jim: So that was that. How was your experience with Stuhldreher? Did you get along with him?

Clyde: Oh yeah, except the same day – I had a bad ankle – same day I got off the crutch, had to go out block and tackle.

Jim: What years were you playing? Do you recall? '37, '38?

Clyde: No later: '40.

Jim: 'Cause Weiss was there –

Clyde: Yeah, '37, '38. I graduated from high school in '37. So, what was it – '38, '39.

Jim: Well, a lot of guys had to go into the service then. Then the draft came along.

Clyde: Right.

Jim: They thought just for a year, then everything changed.

Clyde: But they discontinued [?] at the University. The guys all went to Michigan.

Jim: They discontinued it – that V-5 program took it away. And what was left was a football team, but not really. But they played a schedule in '44, and they played a schedule in '45, 'cause I was there and I watched them.

Clyde: Well, I wasn't there.

Jim: But it wasn't much of a team, because all the talent was in Michigan. So anyway, when you came back to the University, what did you take then? [?] again?

Clyde: Well, I started out in engineering, but I should have taken a refresher course in Math, 'cause I had been out of school for so long. So one day the dean called and said: "you ought to probably think about doing something else." [Laugh.]

Jim: That's a nice way of putting it. [Laugh.]

Clyde: So I needed some credits – I took a bunch of English courses. And I went into Geology – I never used it.

Jim: I took a couple of Geology courses, trying to fill in. But they were hard. I made a mistake. I thought they were just a pipe course [?] to get some credits, but that Laurel Durand – he was tough. Remember him? He was the professor – the Geology professor? Anyways.

Clyde: Well, there's quite a few.

Jim: But you were married yet?

Clyde: After the war, yeah. When I got back, I got married shortly thereafter.

Jim: So you got a Geology degree, but did something else?

Clyde: Yeah, lumber broker. I sold lumber for Fitzpatrick Lumber in Madison. In fact, when I went to work for him, he was president of the alumni association. Jobs were sort of hard to get, so I figured I'll go see this guy as he's president of the alumnae association. So I figured, boy, I could use this guy. So, he asks, "Do you have any experience with lumber?" [long pause] So, jeez, I wind up in a boxcar unloading lumber in a distribution yard. So finally Ralph [?] – he's the sales manager – he comes barreling through there one day in his convertible, and he calls me over and says, "Say, what's this sales [unintelligible?] about this lumber yard is that it's heavy." [Laugh.] So they gave me an old beat up convertible and they sent me to Iowa where they were never represented before.

Jim: You were supposed to open a new territory? With no experience? I can't believe it.

Clyde: That was it. Anyhow, I can remember that somewhere or other I must have [?] the whole story for me, 'cause he gave you a car full of redwood and I went back [?] a \$30,000 dollar car. I don't know. And finally they just went broke – I lost my profit-sharing: the whole damn deal. So I knew my customers – I was up here by that time – I sent me down in Iowa. After I learned the ropes I said, I'm coming up here – check me off. And they weren't too happy with it up here.

Because during the war Simeon gave everything, everything he could get his hands on, to Heuter in Green Bay, a lumber dealer. And everybody else was mad at him. So then I -- another thing to fight down. So I pulled up cars, put five or six dealers in 'em, gave them a car load price. Get in the car myself and unload it.

Jim: Oh, my. That's a lot of work.

Clyde: You ain't kidding. 'Cause otherwise a truck driver takes care of all the stuff. Anyhow, so finally they went broke and I went to the local banker and said, I'd like to own my own company.

Jim: Sure. So you started your own lumberyard?

Clyde: Distribution. By the car load.

Jim: That's sort of wholesale. How did it work out?

Clyde: Very well.

Jim: Good, that's very nice. Did you keep in touch with any of your mates aboard that airplane?

Clyde: Oh, yeah. There's only one that I know of that might still be living.

Jim: They've all died. Did you have any reunions of the 47th?

Clyde: Yeah, some -- I haven't been to any lately.

Jim: Are they held on a yearly basis, do they? Or not quite?

Clyde: Every two years, maybe. The last one was down in Savanna, Georgia.

Jim: They pretty well attended? Whoever else is left?

Clyde: Yes, but thinning out, they're really thinning out.

Jim: Yeah, thousand a day -- WWII guys are gone. And did you join any veterans organizations?

Clyde: Oh yeah, I belong to the Legion.

Jim: Is that active at all?

Clyde: No, I've never been very active. I just pay the dues.

Jim: How about the VFW?

Clyde: I go there occasionally, but I'm not a member.

Jim: Um, I'm running out of things to ask here. Are there any stories that you'd like to tell that would be of interest.

Clyde: Well, I'd like to tell the story of one bombing mission, which I thought was really unusual. And this was an oil target in Marburg, I think, was the name of the place. In target study and BQ training, we got the target – the target was a big area of woods. Then down at the aiming point was a triangular piece of woods, and it showed a railroad running in. Well, when we got there, all those woods were cut in the same size triangles. You know, all over. It must have been twenty of them. And they had the track pretty well camouflaged, and they had another track over in here that you could see very definitely. My heading and things[?] feel to me that it wasn't the right thing. Right. Went in there, and flames shot 5,000 feet in the air.

Jim: So you kept right on track and you weren't diverted by nice little –

Clyde: The flames I think must have gone 5,000 in the air – it was an oil storage field.

Jim: You took it out.

Clyde: The big deal was at Dresden of course – the war was practically over at that time.

Jim: That was a shame that it had to be bombed that badly.

Clyde: I was the first plane over for the 1st Air Force in that.

Jim: In the bombing of Dresden?

Clyde: Right. Our target was a bridge, and that bridge was I think three stories high and six lanes on each of them. Railroad on one. Boy, I tell you. Our group went through there and that bridge was gone [?].

Jim: Took that out right away. Yeah, Dresden was really – it had a fire storm there from all the bombing. That's pretty bad.

Clyde: Yeah, sometimes I think it's a dream – and sometimes I think it's absolutely true that this happened. The war of course [?] cleared up, and it was towards the end of the war, but supposedly there was a pillbox with Germans at Bordeaux, France, after France had been freed, still there. Well, somebody says “well, they should take artillery fighter tanks and put them in the bomb bays with napalm. Like I say, this mission was never listed, but I swear it's almost true. But we went on that – our group and another group. And we dropped these bombs from an old trajectory, so they were tumbling through the air and hit other airplanes.

Jim: They were belly tanks, right, filled with napalm?

Clyde: But I feel so sure – it could have been a dream. I don't know. At that time, you know.

Jim: Sure. Well, sir, I think that should do it.

Clyde: Well, that's fine.

[End of Interview]