

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM L. WELCH

Top Turret Gunner and Flight Engineer, US Army Air Force, World War II

2015

OH
2020

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2020

Welch, L. William (b. 1923). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 2 hours 28 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Viroqua, Wisconsin native William (Bill) Welch recounts his experiences from December 1942 to October 1945 serving as a top turret gunner and flight engineer on B-24 bombers in the Army Air Force with the 490th Bombardment Group stationed in England and later with the 376th Bombardment Group in Italy. Welch recalls his initial decision to volunteer for the Air Force, basic training in Miami Beach (Florida), and aircraft maintenance training at Keesler Air Force Base (Mississippi). Welch later transitioned from maintenance to aerial gunnery school and served with the 849th Squadron 490th Bombardment Group. Welch then describes his route overseas to Diss, England and a trip on leave to London.

Welch covers the air war during the Normandy invasion including: viewing the allied invasion armada from the air, the St. Lo breakthrough as part of Operation Cobra, intense flak cover, and encountering a German fighter jet. He also recalls the members of his original flight crew, the casualties they suffered during bombing missions over occupied France and Belgium, and their eventual disbandment.

From there, Welch was transferred to the 376th Bombardment Group in Bari, Italy where he discusses flying bombing missions over Austria and southern Germany. Particular incidents include receiving frostbite on his hand, crash landing, and narrowly avoiding a doomed take-off by only minutes. Welch then served as a flight engineer near the end of the war and recalls celebrating V-E day. He covers his journey back to the states and his eventual discharge from Fort Sheridan (Illinois). Lastly, Welch discusses his work after leaving the service, his experience as part of a recent Honor Flight, and the high casualty rate among airmen during World War II.

Biographical Sketch:

Welch (b. 1923) served in the US Army Air Force during World War II with the 490th Bombardment Group in England during the Normandy invasion and later the 376th Bombardment Group stationed in Italy. He was discharged in December 1945.

Archivists' Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Ellen Bowers Healey, 2015.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Tristan Krause, 2017.

Abstract written by Tristan Krause, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2020.Welch_user_file1]

Healey: All right. I've turned on the recorder. Today is October 31, 2015. This is an interview with William L. Welch, W-E-L-C-H, who served with the Army Air Force from December 1942 to October 1945, with three years of prior service. This interview is being conducted at Mr. Welch's home in Watertown, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Ellen Healey, and the interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. Okay, and I understand, Mr. Welch, you wanted me to call you Bill as we go through this.

Welch: Yes.

Healey: I do need to ask you. Your middle initial is L. What does the L stand for?

Welch: It stands for Leo. It was my dad's name, Leo.

Healey: All right. And Bill, where were you born?

Welch: I was born in Viroqua, Wisconsin.

Healey: Okay. Did you spend most of your life there in Viroqua, Wisconsin, before you joined the service?

Welch: I spent—I got out of high school at seventeen years old, and I moved to Milwaukee, and I lived in Milwaukee about two years before I got in the service.

Healey: And when you were growing up in Viroqua, did you grow up right in the town or outside of town?

Welch: Right in the city, yeah. Yes.

Healey: Okay. And what did your mom and dad do for a living?

Welch: Well, my dad worked for the Vernon County highway department, but he passed away in 1933, and I was only nine years old. And so we grew up without a dad.

Healey: Okay. So you were born in 1923? Is that right?

Welch: Yes, that's right.

Healey: And you grew up without a dad. Did you have other siblings in the family?

Welch: I had two younger brothers and one older sister.

Healey: Okay. And you graduated from high school there in Viroqua?

Welch: I graduated from high school in Viroqua in 1941. I was just seventeen years old.

Healey: And you indicated that you—well, go ahead. Did you want to say something?

Welch: [Both laugh] If wouldn't have flunked sixth grade—I was only nine years old when I was in sixth grade—if I wouldn't have flunked sixth grade, I would have graduated at sixteen. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. [Laughs] All right. And then you said—right after graduation, did you head to Milwaukee?

Welch: Yes.

Healey: Okay. And why did you go to Milwaukee?

Welch: Well, my sister lived in Milwaukee. She went into Milwaukee to live with—I have a stepsister, a half-sister, in Milwaukee at that time, and she went in there to live with her. My mother was sick, and so we moved into Milwaukee in 1941.

Healey: Oh, the whole family moved?

Welch: The rest of the family. Nineteen forty-one.

Healey: And then what did you do after you graduated from high school?

Welch: I got a job in Milwaukee at the L.L. Cook photo finishing plant, processing film for drugstores, camera stores. I started at twelve cents an hour. [Laughs]

Healey: Twelve cents an hour? Okay. Did you make your way up after that?

Welch: I made my way up to forty-five before I went in the service.

Healey: Okay. So when Pearl Harbor—on Pearl Harbor day in 1941, December 1941, what were you doing?

Welch: We were living on Cass Street in Milwaukee, just right near Lincoln High School. And I had a 1928 Ford, and I took it for a little spin on that Sunday morning, out to the north side. And I ran out of gas. And I went to a gas station and got a can and got some gasoline, took it to my car, and then when I got back to take the can back to the station, he told me that the war—or that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. That's how I found out. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. And were you still—you were eighteen at that time?

Welch: I was only seventeen yet. That was—no, let's see. Yeah, I was eighteen then, because that was December 7, wasn't it, 1941? And I got to be eighteen on November 8, 1941. Yeah.

[00:05:05]

Healey: So that was—I mean, your memory is very good for what happened that Sunday morning. [Both laugh] You ran out of gas. You worked Monday through Friday, or what were your hours?

Welch: Yeah, I worked Monday through Friday for the Cook photo service. And in fact I worked there all day until about 3:30, and then I had a route that I delivered these finished photo pictures to the camera stores and drugstores in South Milwaukee, and Milwaukee, and West Allis. And then they let me take the car home at night. In fact, I could use it if I needed it for my own personal use. Then I had to take it back there in the early morning so that the company could continue with that. So I worked there all day, and then I delivered that route. And I can tell you how I got in the service, then.

Healey: Yes, go ahead.

Welch: Six o'clock in the morning, I decided that I wanted to go to enquire about getting into the Air Force. All my friends were being drafted, and I'm just nineteen years old. Yeah, I was just nineteen years old. And I went down to the induction center four blocks south of Wisconsin Avenue, where they brought in the draftees for that day, thirty-four of them—thirty or forty of them. And they examined them and swore them into service. I stopped there early in the morning, and I went up there, and I asked them, "What would a guy have to do if he wanted to get in the Air Force?" They gave me a form and I filled it out. It took a half an hour or so. And I filled it out. I gave to them, and then they took me in a room. And they checked my eyes, and then they checked my heart, and then they checked my lungs. They took me in another room an hour or so later, and took my clothes off and checked me over totally. Another half an hour, I'm wondering, "What am I going to do with this car? It looks like something different. I have to get the car back to the company." So I called the company. They sent two people over and picked up the car. Another hour later, I was in line with thirty other guys, and they said, "Raise your hand. Raise your right arm." And they swore me into the service.

Healey: And when did that happen? How soon after—

Welch: That same day.

Healey: The same day.

Welch: The same day that I went down there to enquire about it. I'm just nineteen years old. And I—they took us to lunch on Wisconsin Avenue, which was four blocks north of there, at a restaurant, about 10:30 or eleven o'clock. They took us from there over the east side, where there was a railroad station, the old Southwestern, which is not there anymore. That's where Summerfest is. And I was in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, at one o'clock in the afternoon. And I only went down there [laughs] to ask them.

Healey: To enquire. [Laughs] What year and what month was that now?

Welch: That was 1942.

Healey: Nineteen forty-two. Now, 1941—

Welch: October[??].

Healey: —when Pearl Harbor broke out, you had just turned eighteen. Did you get any notices from the draft or anything before that?

Welch: I had to go to a school, I remember, on the north side of Milwaukee, and register for the draft, but I didn't get drafted until I was at Keesler Field, Mississippi, [laughs] in the service. I got my draft card.

Healey: So you registered for the draft, but really nothing happened all of 1942 until you went.

Welch: Well, I was so young yet. They weren't taking them, I don't think, until they were nineteen or twenty or twenty-one, you know. So I would have been. In fact, I was drafted about six months later. I got the draft notice when I was at Keesler Field, Mississippi.

Healey: Now on your form, you indicated that you had three months of prior service?

Welch: I was in the Viroqua National Guard, 120th Field Artillery, Headquarters Department—Headquarters Battalion, in 1939. I was fifteen years old.

[00:10:01]

And I was in from June, July, and August. I needed the money, so I enlisted, and I was in for three months and one day. And my mother knew the commanding officer, Captain Stout, and she told him that she'd like to see me out, and so they discharged me. But I was only fifteen years old.

Healey: Okay. [Both laugh] Did they know you were fifteen years old when you signed up?

Welch: Evidently. But I marched in a parade, I remember, on the Fourth of July. And then I went to Camp McCoy for thirty days, and I carried a radio on my back. And I was also so young that they initiated me, but I took care of the commanding officer's bed, made his bed.

Healey: Okay. [Both laugh] Out at Camp McCoy.

Welch: At Camp McCoy, for thirty days. And then I got back, and then they discharged me. I was still only fifteen.

Healey: Did you—had your mother not stepped in, did you plan on staying in the service?

Welch: No. Well, I don't know.

Healey: Oh, all right.

Welch: [Laughs] I don't know.

Healey: You mentioned you needed the money, and—

Welch: But I was still in high school. I had to go to school in September, and I did. It's weird. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. Let me go back a little bit—

Welch: But that's on my military record. Three months and one day. In fact, that's longevity.

Healey: All right. You indicated that you lost your dad at an early age. You were only nine. What did you and your family and your mom do for money to raise the family during—

Welch: My mother got thirty dollars a month pension, because my dad was in World War I. She got thirty dollars a month, and we paid ten dollars a month rent, and a dollar seventy-five was her insurance, and I paid it every month. We had eighteen dollars and a quarter, I think it was, left to live on for four of us.

Healey: All right. So in Decem—well, go ahead.

Welch: We got by. [Laughs] We had a garden. We got by. My mother didn't work or anything, but we just didn't have anything. I never had a steak, I don't think, until I got in Milwaukee, that I can recall, until—after my dad died, you know. But it was tough, real tough, yeah.

Healey: Yeah. So on the day in, I guess, December of 1942, you went down to enquire. [Laughs]

Welch: Yes.

Healey: And then you ended up at Fort Sheridan, Illinois?

Welch: Yes.

Healey: And what did you do at Fort Sheridan, Illinois?

Welch: Well, I got clothing, and I was there for about ten days or so. Then they put me on a train and sent me to Miami Beach. And if you're familiar with Miami Beach, Collins Avenue is the main street on Miami Beach. And we took basic training at Miami Beach. The Air Force took over a lot of the hotels down there, and I lived in one of the hotels, two or three of them, in fact, over a three-month period, for basic training.

Healey: Was that your first time in Florida?

Welch: Yes.

Healey: What did you think of Miami Beach?

Welch: I liked it.

Healey: Okay. [Both laugh] And this was in December?

Welch: Yes. December, January, and February. And March, also, I think, part of March. I liked it, in fact so much that I bought property down there later. I wanted to live down there. And I sold the property here about five years ago. I had it for about forty years, and sold it.

Healey: In Miami?

Welch: No, up around the entertainment center. You know. What is it?

Healey: Orlando?

Welch: Orlando. Up around Orlando, it was. Yeah. I had five acres up there, and then I had two lots at Punta Gorda. That's on the southwest coast of Florida, Punta Gorda.

Healey: Okay.

[00:15:00]

[taps microphone] Just checking the microphone to make sure it's continuing—or recorder, to make sure it's continuing to work. All right. You were down in— [telephone rings] You're in Miami Beach, Florida, area for three, four months in 1943. That was basic training. Any particular thing you remember about basic training? That stands out in your mind?

Welch: Well, we marched right on Collins Avenue. We took calisthenics on the beach. And we got shots, you know, two or three shots. Then we had to pull KP [kitchen patrol]. And we'd go to some big hotel and pull KP for a day or two, and then go back to our quarters. I lived at the Broadmoor Hotel on 6—I think it's on 62nd Street. It's still there. I lived there for about six weeks, and I lived at Parkview Island for a month or so before that. Then I lived in another hotel before that. But it was interesting. I think while I was there, I went over to Miami one time to go to a dog race, but otherwise we were pretty busy marching and competing other flights. They called them flights, groups of soldiers training. They called them flights. And they were competitive. So we had to do our proper marching and drilling. But that's about all I remember of it.

Healey: Were you generally with other people from the Wisconsin and Illinois area, or were there different people?

Welch: No, most of them were from New York. There were a few people from Wisconsin, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, and the South, mostly.

Healey: When you signed up back in Milwaukee, did you know what your military occupational specialty was going to be, or no?

Welch: No, I just wanted to fly. [Laughs]

Healey: You wanted to fly. [Laughs] Is that pretty much what everyone wanted to do, fly, or not?

Welch: No, most of them wanted to be in the maintenance and supply and so forth, at basic training, I recall.

Healey: And at the end of your basic training in Miami, what did you do from there? Did you go right on to your next training? Did you know you were going to go into flight, or what was determined at the end of your basic training?

Welch: Well, I don't know. Based on my record there, I don't know if it had anything to do with it. Of course, I'm so damn young, we don't know what we're doing, you know, but they shipped me—put me on a train along with a bunch of other recruits, and they shipped us to Biloxi, Mississippi, to Keesler Air Force Base. And there I went to school on aircraft maintenance for about three months. And we—it was interesting, and we gained a little knowledge. I was there about three

months in Biloxi. I met a bunch of guys and had a little fun, and [laughs]. But most—

Healey: What sort of things did you do in your off time?

Welch: Go to Biloxi and drink.

Healey: Okay. [Both laugh] All right.

Welch: I know I had my picture taken along with Paul Wojehowitz[sp??]. He was a friend of mine there. We just went to town and tried to do what—I went skating one time, roller skating, I remember, but there wasn't much to do. We were pretty busy at school. They kept us pretty well—

Healey: And at that time, while you were in that school, did you think you were going to do aircraft maintenance and not fly, or what?

Welch: I don't recall whether I thought that way or not, but I know I was taking that kind of training. Then I think they would talk to us, and kind of indicate what you had in mind, what you requested, because I was enlisted, and I had a little bit more opportunity than some people that were drafted. I think they indicated that I—I think I indicated that I probably wanted to get into the Air Force flying, and so they kind of sent me to those kind of schools.

Healey: Where did you go after maintenance school in Biloxi?

Welch: Then they shipped us to Los Angeles, and then San Diego, California, to Lindbergh Field. We were at the Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft factory.

[00:20:07]

Healey: You said Consolidated—what was the next word?

Welch: Consolidated-Vultee. V—uh, V-A-U-L-T-E-E [*sic*]. Consolidated-Vultee. That's the company that built the B-24. That was their factory. They had two or three others within the country, but the one at San Diego was the original Consolidated B-24 plant. We went to school there for about two months. We went right down to the flight line, to the assembly line where they built the airplanes. In fact, the first time I ever got in an airplane, I took one off the assembly line, and they had to be checked out by the Air Force before they would accept them. I got a ride up with one of the pilots to go on a two-hour checkout of that airplane right off the assembly line at Consolidated, B-24.

Healey: Was that your first time in an airplane?

Welch: First time in an airplane.

Healey: Okay. So when you transferred from Biloxi out to Los Angeles, that was by train, or how did—

Welch: By train, yes. Yes.

Healey: By train. Okay. And what did you think of your first flight?

Welch: I don't know. I'd sit in the belly and [laughs] just enjoyed it. They were up there for a couple of hours just checking all the facilities of the plane to make sure that they report back what's wrong with it, and then they fix it before the Air Force would accept it. And so I did that that one time, and then a week later, I did it again. I got a ride with one of the pilots. We went on another flight doing the same thing.

Healey: Were you flying out of San Diego—

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: —at Lindbergh Field?

Welch: Lindbergh Field, yeah.

Healey: All right. And then how did things progress after that?

Welch: We had a little fun in Lindbergh Field. I remember that downtown there, there was a sign on the lawn that says, "No dogs or sailors," on the lawn, [laughs] and so we were Air Force at San Diego, and we were treated quite well. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. [Both laugh]

Welch: I know I visited the zoo, and I visited a few of the bars there. I went to a show, a USO show there a couple of times. It was interesting, and I loved the climate. San Diego is great. In fact, I have a grandson living there now.

Healey: Okay. And yet you've stayed in Wisconsin all these years.

Welch: Yeah. [Both laugh]

Healey: Okay. All right. So you were down at Lindbergh Field, and you were at the Consolidated-Vultee, the assembly line. By then, did you know that you were going to get flight training, or not?

Welch: No. Still didn't know that. It was still—most of the people that I was with in school there, some of them were from Biloxi, where we went to school at Keesler Field. They were with us, but they didn't appear to be wanting to fly. But some of

us did, and so we just didn't think much about that. We just went to school. In fact, at school at San Diego, there were other—there were a few Navy people in with our class.

Healey: So what kind of a school was that, that you were going—

Welch: Well, just general aeronautics and maintenance, mostly. And I say, we went right down to the assembly line where the gals were riveting the planes together. It was interesting and fun. But after San Diego, then I got in one of these planes that the Air Force had ordered, and they flew us to Tucson, Arizona. Again, we had some classes there with regard to aircraft maintenance and all that kind of stuff. When we took a shower, we could just walk outside and dry off. [Laughs] Just evaporate.

[00:24:41]

But I was at Tucson then only for a month or so for some—I don't recall exactly what they did. But then I flew in one of those aircraft again to Lincoln, Nebraska. And I got to Lincoln, Nebraska, and then they asked us if we wanted to fly or not. I was one of three or four that indicated that we wanted to fly. So they did—at that time, I got a seven-day delay en route. That was—if you know what that is. That's a seven-day delay en route, and I went back to Milwaukee for two days. Then I had to be in Salt Lake City in seven days. And I got there.

Healey: So by that time, you joined in December of 1942, so by the time you got your seven-day delay, you'd gone through a lot of schooling. So where are you in terms of months and years now, before you went to Salt Lake? Any recollection of that?

Welch: Yeah, that would be, [pause] let's see. That would be about October of '42. No, wait now. Let's see, '42—yeah, that would be October of '43.

In '43, I was at Salt Lake City, but I was only there for a couple of days, and they sent us to Wendover, Utah. That was aerial gunnery school, where you had to learn how to fire the 50-caliber machinegun, and the shotguns, and the pistols, and all the other weapons. We were there for three months at Wendover, Utah. That's out in kind of the desert. In fact, we used to visit a hotel there that was right on the border of Utah and Nevada, and you could gamble in one room, but you couldn't gamble in the other room.

Healey: Okay. [Laughs]

Welch: It was right on the border.

Healey: Now all the way through this, were you kind of with any of the same guys for training? Did they follow you through?

Welch: Yeah, generally, but not that close, until I got into—at Wendover, Utah, I got to know a guy. We went to school together at Wendover, gunnery school, with Earl Dorr. Earl Dorr. D-O-R-R. He was from Massachusetts, and I got to be real good friends with him. We got aerial gunnery training there, and learned how to lead an aircraft, you know. We shot skeet. We'd shoot skeet, a hundred rounds a day, 12-gauge Remington pump shotguns, a hundred rounds a day shooting skeet to learn how to lead a target. That's one of the ways they trained us. It was fun. Some of the guys got their shoulder black and blue because it kicked so much, but I remember one time I got twenty-five out of twenty-five. And I remember our instructor could take a 12-gauge shotgun and put it on his hip and hit them, he was so good. He could shoot from the hip, 12-gauge.

Healey: Had you ever shot weapons before, before you went into the service?

Welch: No. Well, I handled a few when I was in the National Guards. I shot a few rounds. But that's all. But yeah, that was interesting, skeet shooting, and then learning how to lead an aircraft, you know, in flight. I got to know Earl Dorr there. And I was at that school for about three months.

Healey: Is he somebody you kept in contact with?

[00:29:45]

Welch: Yes, yes. I did. In fact, we got out of school in December, late December 1943, and he and I both went to Boise, Idaho. Some of our training was coming to the end, as far as aircraft. And when we got to Boise, Idaho, there were two crews, Lieutenant Kurmode's[sp??] crew, and Lieutenant Carter's crew. Had nine guys on each one. A crew is normally ten, and so I had the option of getting on Kurmode's crew, or getting on Carter's crew, and my friend Dorr had the option of getting on Kurmode's crew or Carter's crew. I got talking to Don Maves[sp??], who was on—Don Maves. He was on Carter's crew. I decided to get on Carter's crew. Don went on Kurmode's crew, and I'm kind of mentioning that, because months later, it was kind of a factor.

Healey: Now, while you were getting all this training for approximately two years, were you and the other folks you were training with keeping up with what was going on in the war?

Welch: Not really. [Laughs] Well, we'd hear about stuff. We'd hear about a battle. There wasn't too much going on until late '43. In World War II, there was—it started at the end of '41. In '42, there wasn't much going on, except the B-25s that bombed Tokyo, remember, off of the ship in the Pacific. That was—who was that pilot that—they were on a ship, B-25s, and they bombed—

Healey: Was it Doolittle? Is that what you're—I'm not sure.

Welch: Was it Doolittle? I guess it was, yeah. But we didn't hear much as far as news, because we were doing something all the time, or trying to have some fun.
[Laughs]

Healey: So you were on Carter's crew.

Welch: I was on Carter's crew, but Carter, he decided he didn't want to fly, and so he quit. And they broke him down from a second lieutenant to a buck sergeant. We got a new pilot, Captain Allen[sp??], was our crew. And he'd been in the service for about six or seven years, and he'd been experienced with other aircraft. And he took over our crew, Captain Allen. And let's see, now. I'm at Boise. Then from Boise, we moved to Mountain Home, Idaho. That's south of Boise, about thirty, forty miles. And there we trained for three months with B-24s. Captain Allen's crew, Lieutenant Kurmode's crew, all the other crews.

We had about twelve or fifteen crews in each squadron. There were four squadrons in a group. I was in the 849th Squadron of the 490th Bomb Group. We had the 848th, 849th, 850th, and the 851st squadrons in one group. We trained at Mountain Home, Idaho, for January, February, and March, flying as often as we could with weather conditions, learning how to do this and that, picking up some experience and some flying time.

Healey: So you were actually flying at that time. You weren't just a member of the crew.

Welch: Yep. Flying every day, if weather was appropriate.

Healey: Okay. Flying both as the copilot and the pilot, or what?

Welch: I was flying as a top turret gunner. I was a qualified flight engineer, I was, but we already had a flight engineer when I joined the crew, and they needed just one more man. And so to get on that crew, I took the top turret flight job on the B-24.

Healey: Can you explain a little bit more what that is on a B-24, to be on the top turret?

[00:34:56]

Welch: Well, it's on the front area of the wing, right above the wing, with a turret up there that operates, hydraulically it did. And of course, the B-24 had a nose turret, a top turret, a tail turret, and a ball turret, all four. Then it had two 50-caliber machineguns sticking out on each side, you know. That's the way they were armed. Maves, my friend Maves that I knew, that I decided to get on Carter's crew at the time, he was a nose turret gunner. Glen Larson was the tail turret gunner. Chuck Cormeer[sp??] was the radio operator. John Mikita[sp??] was the ball turret operator. I was the top turret gunner. Bill Schifflet[sp??] was the

engineer. I could have been engineer, but he was the engineer, and I had to take the tenth place on that aircraft at that time, because that was the only opening.

Healey: Okay. So you continued your training at Boise, Idaho, I think, and then were—

Welch: Mountain Home, Idaho.

Healey: Mountain Home, Idaho. Excuse me.

Welch: That's where—we were at Boise, Idaho, only a short time, three or four weeks, maybe a month. But then we went to Mountain Home, Idaho. That's where we did our—they called it the three-phase training. Three months, it took, to just practice prior to getting new aircraft and going overseas. I don't want to confuse you, here. [Both laugh]

Healey: You're doing very well, here. Yeah, I'm a little bit confused, but you're very clear. All right. So you mentioned all of these folks on your crew by name. Did that crew stay together, even after you left Mountain Home?

Welch: Yes. We got new—after we were there for three months at Mountain Home, Idaho—that was our phase training—we got new aircraft and brand new airplanes.

Healey: B-24s?

Welch: Brand new B-24s. And we flew them for a couple of days, and then we went to Lincoln, Nebraska, and we got orders to go to England. So we had to fly to England. So the way we did it, we flew from Lincoln, Nebraska, to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Bill Schifflet, the engineer, as you have recorded, lived at Alton, Alabama, which is a little town by Birmingham. We decided to buzz it on the way down, [both laugh] so we found it on the way to Fort Lauderdale. We found it, and we went down there three times at about two hundred feet, and we buzzed it. And all the people were out waving their hands. We found his house.

Healey: Okay. Did he tell people ahead of time that he was going to buzz it?

Welch: No, but they knew it.

Healey: [Both laugh] They knew it.

Welch: We came in very low twice, and we buzzed it, and then we went on to Fort Lauderdale. Then we went on through Central America and down to Belém, down to Brazil. Natal, Brazil, is on the east coast of Brazil. Natal. You're familiar with that, probably.

Healey: Did you stop at those places?

Welch: Yeah, we stopped in Central America a couple places, and then we stopped at Belém, and we stopped at Trinidad. Then we stopped at Natal. That's in Brazil.

Healey: Now I am a little confused. This is on your way to England?

Welch: Yeah, through the southern route, because of the weather. You couldn't fly on the northern route because the weather was bad, so they flew us the southern route through central America, South America, Africa, Marrakech, then all the way up to England from Africa.

[00:40:07]

Healey: And you stopped for refueling, I take it.

Welch: Yeah, we had to refuel, because our aircraft only held about two thousand gallons. However, during that trip, we also had belly tanks in the bomb bay with fuel. Put fuel in the portable belly tanks in the bomb bay, instead of bombs, of course. We flew then to Dakar.

Healey: Did your plane fly alone, or were you flying with a group of planes?

Welch: We were flying alone. There were other craft that were behind us, maybe a day or so, but we all flew by ourselves.

Healey: Were you armed at all? Was the plane armed?

Welch: Yeah, we had armaments. We had to, because we eventually had to fly up around France, and it was thought that the Germans would come out on the way up and attack us, so we had ammunition, yeah.

Healey: Okay. Now you were telling more about your route, and I interrupted you. You'd come through Africa, and then—

Welch: Yeah. We went from Natal—that's in Brazil—across the Atlantic to Dakar. That's in West Africa, right on the coast. We fueled up there, and stayed overnight, I think. Then they checked the aircraft. And from Dakar—that's on West Africa—we flew up to Marrakech. Marrakech is up on northwest Africa, near the Mediterranean. Then we stayed there and fueled up. Then from there, it was about a six, seven-hour flight up around Portugal and Spain, and France, out over the Atlantic, up the coast of France. Then we landed in England, southwest coast of England. So we finally got there. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. I don't know if you mentioned or not. Who was your navigator?

Welch: The navigator was Lester Bishop. He's from Columbus, Ohio. He's dead, also.

Healey: Okay.

Welch: I'm the last member of the crew. They're all gone. Two of them were prisoners of war.

Healey: Oh, okay. We'll talk about that in a little bit. You said you were on the southwest coast of England. What base were you at?

Welch: I don't recall that. It was just a spot that we landed on the southwest coast of England. We were only there just to fuel up.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Welch: And then from there we flew over to Eye, E-Y-E. Eye, England. That's just north-northeast of London, about eighty miles. Another town right near Eye was Diss, D-I-S-S. That's where our base was. 490th Bomb Group was based there.

Healey: Okay. And approximately when did you get to England?

Welch: First of April, 1944.

Healey: Okay.

Welch: See, the Normandy invasion was in June 1944, so we were there a couple of months before Normandy.

Healey: Okay. And once you got to England, and got situated at the base, what was your day-to-day activity like?

Welch: Well, we moved into Nissen huts. They had Nissen huts built for us.

Healey: What are Nissen huts?

Welch: Well, that's that little building, you know, that's rounded—

Healey: Are they rounded?

Welch: —and long. Our barracks were in there.

Healey: Barracks or—

Welch: Yeah, they're around here.

Healey: Like Butler buildings? I don't know if they're called Butler buildings. Nissen.

Welch: Maybe. I don't know. They were about probably forty feet long and about probably fifteen foot wide. And then they had that round—

Healey: They're metal?

Welch: Metal, yeah. We lived in those. We had about two or three crews were in each one.

Healey: What did you do for heating?

[00:44:54]

Welch: Well, it was pretty warm at that time, there, but we had charcoal. Charcoal. In fact, old Don Maves—no, Bill Schifflet, from Alabama, there, his ma shipped him some peanuts over there, and we used to roast them on the stove. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. Is that the first time you roasted peanuts?

Welch: It's the first time, yep. They were raw.

Healey: What did you think of them?

Welch: Well, he knew how to handle it. Alabama is a peanut country. That's where old, what's his name, Carter came from, you know, President Carter.

Healey: Alabama, Georgia, Georgia area.

Welch: Yeah, see, that's peanut country. So they used to send him peanuts, and we'd roast them on the charcoal oven that we used to heat that building. And we'd just pass the time away, gambled, played cards, gambled, drank beer, went to London. We'd get a leave for a couple of days, and we'd go to London. I went with Don—with Earl Dorr to London three times. He was my friend. And I went—

Healey: What was your impression of London in 1944?

Welch: It was okay. We'd go railroad from Diss. We went from Diss to London. It'd take a couple hours, I guess. We'd come out at the station and take a cab over to—I remember going by where they had the British offices of whatever. Anyhow, they had guards out there, you know. They were marching. What did they call it? I forget. But we got off the train and went to Piccadilly.

[Laughs] And I know I stayed at the Normandy Hotel. I shouldn't maybe tell you that, but Dorr and I stayed at the Normandy Hotel for two days. We gave a false name, each of us, and when it came time to pay the bill, we took off. [Laughs] And that Normandy Hotel is still there. Maybe I should offer to pay them. [Laughs] But anyhow, Piccadilly was interesting. The Normandy Hotel is there. I

looked it up on the computer. But, yeah, it was—London was pretty well bombed out.

Healey: I was going to ask you. Were you able to see bombing sites?

Welch: Well, a lot of buildings were all knocked down, yeah. I was there during a couple of air raids, and then they'd send you into the subway, you know, down below.

Healey: So you actually went into the subways?

Welch: Yeah. Well, I never rode on one, but I went into them as a shelter from a bombing mission. But London was pretty well bombed up. It was always dark there. They didn't have any lights on at night at all. They had double daylight saving time, too, so it didn't get dark until about 9:30 at night. Double daylight saving time, they had. Yeah, London was fun. I know I went to Hyde Park there, got in a little boat ride. Dorr and I went on a little boat ride there. We didn't have any girls, and I know one time I met a guy from England there, and his mother lived in London. They took Dorr and I to dinner at their house one time. That was fun. In fact, they had a beef roast, which they had very rarely had, but they had a beef roast for us that day. It was interesting. I know I went to Churchill's headquarters there, where Eisenhower was, at—what do they call it? You know the headquarters where the government is there?

Healey: Downing Street?

Welch: Yeah, yeah, Number Ten Downing Street. Number Ten Downing Street. We walked right up to it. There was a guard there at the door. The building was right out to the edge of the sidewalk, almost. Eisenhower was in there at the time. You know, they didn't—I'll betcha you can't get within a quarter mile of that now, but we could walk right up to the building. They had a guard there. Number Ten Downing Street. I remember going there. It was interesting.

[00:50:13]

Healey: When you went to—if you visited other cities other than London while you were there, did they observe the same lights out at night, or not?

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: All over.

Welch: Total blackout. Yeah. See, they had bombs coming over from France and Germany, bombing England at that time.

Healey: Did the trains run at night?

Welch: No, they ran normally, during the day and night both, I guess.

Healey: Now you mentioned you were able to walk up to Number Ten Downing Street without any security around.

Welch: Well, there was a guy, a guard there. You couldn't get in the door, of course.

Healey: Back at the base, and I don't know if you told me—you did tell me where the base was. Back at the base, what kind of security was around that?

Welch: None. We didn't have any security. You had a main gate that had a guard there, you know. But I had a bicycle there, and so did Dorr, and so we could get out of the base without going through the main gate.

Healey: Fences around, or no?

Welch: No fences. Right out in the farm fields. In fact, we had a farmer that, right near the aircraft, was out there with—he had a scythe, cutting by hand. They raised crops right next to our air base, right there.

Healey: And you had B-24s, were there, right out there?

Welch: Yeah, about forty, fifty of them.

Healey: Were they covered?

Welch: No.

Healey: No? Just out in plain view?

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: Okay.

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: And did you do flight training while you were there?

Welch: Yeah. Initially when we got there, we had to practice flight for a couple of weeks, and then we started—well, I went to Cologne on a bombing mission, I know, and I went to Belgium, and France. And then our pilot, Captain Allen—this is interesting—he had been in the service, like I said before, for six, seven years, and he was a captain, which was unusual. He made operations officer of the 850th Bomb Group—Bomb Squadron. It was in our group. And so we don't have a pilot. We don't have a pilot. And so then we are flying with other crews as somebody was sick. Larson, our tail gunner, he flew with another crew one day,

and they got hit over Normandy. That's when the Normandy invasion—the second day, June 7. He got hit, and he bailed out, and he drowned in the English Channel. And so we don't have a pilot, and we don't have a tail gunner. And then Schifflet, the engineer, he flew with another crew, and he got hit. His oxygen supply was hit, and he was at twenty-five thousand feet, and he died from lack of oxygen.

Healey: All while with other crews.

Welch: Flying with other crews, because our crew was kind of busted up, because we don't have a pilot.

Healey: So were you still—when these two service members died, were you flying with other crews, too?

Welch: Yes. And then our copilot, he flew with another crew, Jim Fuller. They got hit, and he bailed out. And he was a prisoner of war.

Healey: Do you know where he was a prisoner of war?

Welch: Pardon?

Healey: Do you know where he was as a prisoner of war?

Welch: No, not exactly. I did talk to him after the war, and he probably told me, but I don't recall. But in Germany somewhere. There's an unusual story about that, too, and I'll tell you about it a little later. But then, yeah, I flew with other crews here and there. I flew about twelve, thirteen missions in England. Then, let's see.

[00:55:15]

Healey: And were you flying as a gunner at that time?

Welch: Yeah, a gunner, yeah.

Healey: Any position, or all different positions as a gunner?

Welch: I flew either a top turret or a waist gunner. That's where we had a 50 sticking out on both sides, out on the sides of it, either side of the plane. A 50 sticking out, you know. Froze my hand. Forty below zero. That's still—these are all locked up. They locked up.

Healey: Go ahead and explain more. I understand you're flying at high altitudes, I gather, and it's cold.

Welch: Yeah, twenty-four, twenty-five thousand feet. And it's forty, forty-five degrees below zero.

Healey: And is your hand sticking out all the time, or what?

Welch: No, no. You wore gloves, and they were heated, too, to a degree, but it didn't work that much. But if you took your glove off for any length of time, if you're in the waist and it's forty below zero, it's frozen. You know, it freezes that quick. I was working on a 50-caliber machinegun. That was in Italy, when I was in Italy. And I had to try to get it unjammed, and I froze my right hand. Then one other time, I froze my right thumb. But those are things you have to put up with. Yeah, it's cold up there.

Then, let's see. We're still in England, there. Yeah. So then I flew—a guy was sick on McAusland's crew. He was sick, and so I flew for him. I don't know where I went. I forget. But the next day he was also sick, and I was there to fly for him again. I'm about ready to get on the airplane, I mean within two or three minutes, and here comes a Jeep out from the squadron, and he says, "Hey, Welch, I'm okay." And so I get in the Jeep, and I go back to the squadron, and he takes over, because he's not sick anymore. They crashed on takeoff. He was killed, and two others were killed. The rest of them were all banged up. It blew up on takeoff.

Healey: Had you already gone and left the area, or did you—

Welch: I had gotten back to the squadron in the Jeep, yeah. He took my place.

Healey: So you weren't there when they crashed.

Welch: Well, I was at the base, but—I knew about the crash, but I didn't know who it was until later. I could have been on that thing. I would have been on that thing within a couple minutes, but he came out, and Hey, Welch! Oh, okay. So I went back in the Jeep, and he—and that plane should not have crashed. It was the engineer, the pilot, and the copilot. They have checks; they have to go through prior to takeoff, a couple of times they go through them. I was an engineer. I know. And they forgot to take the pitot tube covers off. If you know what a pitot tube is?

Healey: No. What is that?

Welch: Pitot tube. It hangs out, one on each side of the wing, and it registers the airspeed. As you're going down the runway or in flight, the airflow goes in there, and it registers on your instruments. They forgot to take the covers off. They're kept on overnight. They go down the runway, they got airspeed, but they can't—it doesn't register. No airspeed. So the pilot tries to brake it and stop the airplane. He ran out of runway and blew up. That's what happened to that airplane. But he did have airspeed, but he didn't feel it. He should have taken off, but the pilot didn't feel it,

and so he tried to brake the thing, and ran out of runway, and blew up, and killed three guys—two guys, I guess it was, and banged all the rest of them up, and lost the airplane.

Healey: Whose job is it to take off the pitot tubes' covers?

[01:00:00]

Welch: It's the engineer and the pilot and the copilot, to make damn sure they're off, but the ground crew probably would have taken them off. But they got to make sure they are off, and they didn't.

Healey: When they go through their check.

Welch: Yeah. They didn't check it.

Healey: And that's a physical check of the plane?

Welch: Yeah, yeah. And they forgot to take them—just a little cover over the—to protect it.

Healey: Not knowing what a pitot tube is, but I take it it's a physical check when you're going around the outside of the plane, before you get in, or is it inside?

Welch: No, it's just a little instrument that hangs up here with a little tube on the end of it, and the air flows into it, and it registers your airspeed. Pitot tubes, they're called.

Healey: How do you spell pitot?

Welch: P-I-T-O—pitot tube. I think that's right. [Laughs]

Healey: All right. Hmm. Okay. All right. So did you continue flying with other crews? Did you fly with other crews all—

Welch: Well, see, then there's only three of us left. The copilot was a prisoner of war. The pilot, he got that other job. Two of them are killed, and the radio operator, he got on—Cormeer got on Brady's crew as a radio operator, because they needed a crew member for some reason. I don't know why. But anyhow, there's only three of us left, besides the bombardier and the navigator. So they shipped us three guys to Italy, Welch, Mikita, and Maves, all three of us. They shipped us to Italy. We got down there from England to Naples, Naples, Italy, and Caserta. That's on the west coast of Italy. They sent—we were at Caserta for awhile, and then they shipped about—there were about thirty of us at the time. We went with a bunch of guys. They shipped us by train to Bari, Italy. That's across the lower peninsula of Italy.

At Bari, we went to a group there, and they assigned us to different groups within Italy, us three guys, Maves, Welch, and Mikita. They assigned me to the 376th Bomb Group, and they assigned Maves and Mikita to groups that are further north. And I don't know who they were, what groups they were, but I got in the 376th Bomb Group. And that was in the heel of the boot of Italy. If you're familiar with the Italian peninsula, it's down in the southeastern part of Italy, the heel of the boot. 376th Bomb Group was the oldest group, flying group, in the—one of the oldest in the whole war. Originally, the 376th was in Africa, during the war in Africa, north Africa. Then they moved across north Africa to Saudi Arabia, and they were based at Benghazi. People have heard of Benghazi today because of Hillary. Anyhow, after the army took control of Italy, the 376th moved into Italy and were based at the heel of the boot, the bottom of Italy. That's where I was then.

Healey: What were your living quarters like then?

Welch: Tents. We lived in a six-man tent. There were four of us in each one.

Healey: And what time of the year were you there?

Welch: I got there in November of 1946.

Healey: Was there actually a base there of some sort?

[01:05:00]

Welch: Yes, airbase there. They had fifty aircraft, the 376th.

Healey: Did the airbase have a name?

Welch: Hmm, I don't recall it. It did have a name, but it was at Lecce, L-E-E-C-E [*sic*]. That's the town that it was near, Lecce. L-E-E-C-E, Lecce.

Healey: You know, something I hadn't asked—

Welch: Yeah, ask some questions. Yeah, you can ask some questions.

Healey: Okay. Something I haven't asked you about. You described very well—

Welch: I can go back.

Healey: —your progress, but going back, you indicated that you did bombing flights in various places, too, including Cologne and a number of other places when you were in Italy. Before you went on those bombing missions, did you get briefed as to where you were going?

Welch: Oh, yeah. We got up about 3:30 in the morning, and we went to breakfast, and then we went to a briefing and picked up our parachute. They'd tell us where we were going, tell us the route, tell us how many guns could fire at us at a particular time, flak. Tell us if they thought there would be fighters there. And they'd route us to the target, you know, a specific way that they knew to hopefully stay away from as much flak as you could.

Healey: And so you-all had parachutes on, when—

Welch: Well, we picked up the parachute and then took it to the plane with us, yeah.

Healey: All right. And y'all—everybody on the crew would know exactly where you were going, or what your target was?

Welch: Yeah, yeah.

Healey: Okay. Did you all have maps of the target, or just the navigator, or no?

Welch: No, no. No, just the navigator. And the pilot would know where he's going, yeah, and the copilot. But no, we didn't. The navigator would have the trip organized there.

Healey: How often were you flying? Weekly? Daily? What?

Welch: Well, daily if the weather was right, but of course, the weather was bad over the target, you couldn't take it then.

Healey: Did you have some flights or missions that got cancelled when you went into the ready room?

Welch: Oh yeah.

Healey: I don't know what you call that, where you get the briefing.

Welch: That's the briefing room, but I don't recall having one cancelled at that time. But we would have a flight that we'd take off, and then we'd find out an hour later that our target wasn't available, so we'd have to come back. And oftentimes we'd come back with a load of bombs and try to land with that, or else drop them in the Adriatic or whatever. But yeah, you can ask some questions. There's a lot of things. [Laughs]

Healey: Well, you mentioned that, I think, you were going tell me more about someone who became a prisoner of war? Oh, your copilot bailed out, and he became a prisoner of war.

Welch: Yeah, Lieutenant Fuller. Then in Italy, Mikita went to the group north of me. He came down with me from England, Mikita, I, and Maves. Mikita got in a group up in northern Italy from where I was, and he was on a mission, and he got shot down. And he bailed out, and he was a prisoner of war. And what's funny about it, or unique, is that he and Lieutenant Fuller, bailing out from England, met in the same prison camp [laughs] in Germany. They were in the same prison camp. I talked to them, of course, after the war. They both lived, and they got out of the prison camp.

Healey: At the end of the war?

Welch: Yeah, at the—

Healey: Did they ever talk to you about their conditions?

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: Yeah?

Welch: Yeah, but I don't remember much about that. But I remember Fuller was telling me about one time they were out picking potatoes, and the potatoes were going to go to a German outfit, I guess, that was there. They had a load of potatoes, and guys all got up on there and took a leak on them. [Laughs] That was kind of interesting, I would think. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. So when you got to talk to them later, was it back in the States, or did you see them—

[01:09:49]

Welch: Back in the States. Yeah, we had reunions. I went to about three or four reunions of the group, 490th Bomb Group. We'd get together there, you know, and still do, but there's nobody left much. But they got wives and the daughters and the sons, and I guess they pull it yet. We had reunions in Milwaukee, and Miami, and Detroit, and I went to one in Las Vegas, I think it was. But get-togethers.

Healey: Okay. How long were you in Italy?

Welch: Well, I was in Italy until the end of the war, from November 1944 until June, I think it was, of 1945.

Healey: And you indicated you were—did you get on a permanent flight crew, or were you always just rotating positions?

Welch: I was always rotating. But I did—near the end of the war, I got—I was flying engineer then, but I was still filling in for somebody. But I know the first time I

flew as an engineer, flight engineer; I got promoted to tech sergeant. I was a tech sergeant. See, the radio operator and the flight engineer were tech sergeants, and the other crew members—the other four, were staff sergeants. We had a pilot in the 376th, a flight officer, he was. He wasn't a commission. You know what that is. You were in the service. He was a flight officer. He didn't have a commission. He was nineteen years old, and he was a pilot. We used to hang around with him a little bit. And I think he died lately.

But anyhow, yeah, I know I was on one flight from the 376th. We were going to Yugoslavia. And we got out over the Adriatic, and the number three engine caught on fire. I told him about it, and then we cut the power off, and then we cut the—we feathered it.

Healey: You did what to it?

Welch: Feathered it.

Healey: Feathered it, which means?

Welch: Feathered the prop. Changed the prop from this position to flat, so it goes with the wind. You know, the propeller? Feathered it. We had propellers on our aircraft. [Laughs] We didn't have jets. Anyhow, we feathered it, and then we went into a—we fell out of formation. See, we were flying formation all the time. Hell, within thirty, forty feet of the other airplane. Anyhow, we fell out of formation, and we dropped the bombs in the Adriatic, and then we went back home. We didn't have to go. [Laughs] But that engine caught on fire. That happened once in awhile. In fact, it happened another time with me.

Healey: Not as a result of being hit by anything, but just engine failure?

Welch: Just caught on fire, yeah. One time it caught on fire, going, actually, over the Adriatic again. I think I was going to Vienna. Engine caught on fire, and, let's see. That was Lieutenant Hawili was the pilot. Hawili. And that guy, he got his ass chewed, I'll tell you. But anyhow, we came back without dropping the bombs, and landed with a full load of five thousand pounds of bombs. And that's kind of difficult coming back from a mission without—we lost an engine. Caught on fire again, but we got it out. And then we came back, and we had a load of bombs, and we came in—or did I tell you already? We came in three times, and we came in too high once, to land, so we had to go around; and we came in too high again with a load of bombs and had to go around; and finally on the third time, we got in, and we got down safely. But he got his ass chewed, Lieutenant Hawili, our commanding officer.

Healey: He got chewed out. Why?

Welch: Because he came in so high. He wasn't flying properly. That's wrong, you know. And especially if you got a load of bombs, and you get down that low, and you have to go around again, maybe you can't get up. If you can't get up—get enough airspeed to get around again, you're down. And so he got chewed out real good. Hawili. I remember him.

Healey: Did he fly again?

[01:15:00]

Welch: Yeah, he flew again, but I suppose he had to get checked out, maybe. I don't know. But they'd check them out once in a while. We did that. I went on a few checkout flights when I was hanging around there. I remember I was with somebody, and our tents had a chimney up there. We made it out of bomb fuse cans. And, by God, we came so low, we blew one of those chimneys off, [both laugh] buzzing it. Another time, I saw a P-51 buzz our squadron in Italy there. He was so damn low, if he'd have dropped his gear, he'd have touched. He was so damn low. You know, those kids flying those P-51s? Just for the hell of it, he buzzed us.

Healey: Okay, I was going to ask if he was doing it just for the heck of it, yeah.

Welch: Well, sure. Just for the fun of it, yeah. Yeah, there's stories about that. Then one time, I was hanging around there doing whatever I had to do, and I was on kind of guard duty one night with a Jeep. They had us running around kind of protecting the aircraft that were on the ground, to make sure nobody bothered them. I got out there one time, and here I look. There's a shoe over there. Some shoe. I went over there, and I looked at it, and it had a foot in it. Airplane crashed, and they didn't pick it all up. [Laughs] I turned it in to them. I don't know what they did with it, but somebody's shoe was there with a foot in it, on the base. God, you know. That's bad.

Healey: Was this base—did it have wire around it or a fence around it?

Welch: No, no.

Healey: No. Was it near civilians? Italians?

Welch: They were around there. Italians. In fact, they used to come up to us at mess hall time, and instead of throwing the leftover stuff in the garbage, they'd take it and eat it, you know. They needed something to eat, and so we would give it to them. Yeah. We ate—our mess hall was in a shelter, but we lived in tents. There was four of us in each tent. I got some pictures of my tent, and I got some pictures of me there, too.

Healey: You also said you had some pictures of some of the bombing runs that you went on.

Welch: Yeah. I have.

Healey: Where did those pictures come from? Did you take them, or someone else?

Welch: No. On the aircraft, one aircraft in each squadron would have a camera mounted on the rear hatch, and it took eight by ten pictures. You turned it on on the bomb run, and it would take a picture every few seconds or minutes, or whatever. I was familiar with photo, because I was working at that when I was a kid, and so I would go down to the photo lab, and I'd ask them if I could have a picture of that, you know. They'd give me one. I got four or five of them.

Healey: Do you know what areas they were over, the pictures that you got?

Welch: I think they're marked on the back. I think they're marked on the back, yeah, some of them.

Healey: So I take it part of the purpose was, so when you got back, somebody could examine those and try to determine whether or not you—

Welch: Yeah, determine what they did. If the target was successful in bombing, that's what they were taken for, yeah.

Healey: Now, when you were flying out of southern Italy—and I forgot. How long were you there? How many months did you fly?

Welch: I was there from November '44 till June of '45. Yeah. Then we flew back, too, the same route, basically.

Healey: Were you usually flying missions in Yugoslavia and Italy, or where were your targets?

Welch: No, mostly—I've been to Munich. I went to Munich, and Vienna, and Linz, Graz. That's up in the Alps. They're all up in the Alps. Innsbruck. That's up around where Hitler was living. Innsbruck. That's up in the Alps, south of Germany. Yeah, south of Germany. And we went to Vienna, I said, and—

Healey: To drop bombs in Vienna?

Welch: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, one time somebody sent a kid in our tent a can of Vienna sausages, you know, in the can. These little Vienna sausages. And I took it, [laughs] dropped it out over Vienna.

[01:20:01]

Healey: [Both laugh] Why did you do that?

Welch: Just for the hell of it. [Laughs] I knew I was going, and so I took it along. Bomb bay doors opened, and I dropped it. But you got to have some fun, you know.

Healey: I guess.

Welch: Besides eating the K-ration on the way back.

Healey: Oh, I was going to ask you. You mentioned going to the chow hall and saving some of the chow, or dining facility or whatever you called it at the time. What was your food like?

Welch: It was all C-rations. We had baked bread. They had a bakery there someplace.

Healey: So you took your C-rats to eat at the—

Welch: C-rations, yeah.

Healey: C-rations to eat at the dining facility?

Welch: Yeah, at our mess hall. We congregated down at the squadron headquarters there. Each squadron had a chef and helpers, and they just heated up the—well, I don't know how they got them, but they must have come in big cans or something, and they heated it up. It was tastable, and it was eatable, and it was all right, but it was not like you'd have. We didn't have any eggs, or I don't remember having any milk. Maybe we—

Healey: But they baked bread?

Welch: Yeah, we did have. I guess we did have powdered milk, yeah. And then I remember when I first got there in November, we were there for Thanksgiving, and we had a turkey. I started biting into a leg, and it wasn't cooked [laughs] totally. [Laughs] That was a little bit different. But they fed us, you know. But on flight, they gave us the K-ration. The K-ration was in a box about that long, and it had a can of—like those cat food cans of—it had meat or mixed vegetables, whatever. I think there were three different varieties. And then it had four cigarettes and a little candy bar. And it had—well, you must have one of those over at the museum, a K-ration. It had like graham crackers in there, but they were harder. Hardtack, they called them. They gave us one of those to munch on, if we had time.

Healey: Okay. How long were your flights, typically, if there was any typical—

Welch: Oh, they were average from four to eight hours. You'd go up to Munich from our base way in the southern part of Italy. It's a long flight. Munich is up over the Alps. You start climbing over the Alps. They look pretty rigid, I'll tell you, when you're not that high over them.

Healey: Why was there a base so—and I think that's kind of why I asked if you were just doing bombing missions in Yugoslavia and Italy, because it seems unusual. Or what was the reason for having a base so far south in Italy, when your bombing targets were pretty far north?

Welch: Well, that was because the 376th Bomb Group was one of the earliest there, and they were originally based in Benghazi, which is across the Mediterranean in Africa. The 376th was the first group to move into Italy after the Army took over. See, the Army moved in from the south, and they kept moving up, and as soon as they got into an area where they could put an airbase, they put it in. And the first place they could put it was in the heel of the boot, and the 376th was the first one to move in there, and that's why were continually based there all the time. North of there a hundred miles, they had other bases that they established later on, throughout Italy. But a bombing base was pretty elaborate, you know. That had to have good runways and a lot of stuff there, rather than a fighter base that didn't have that.

Healey: Do you know who built the runway there, where you were? Was that built by American engineers, or by—

Welch: Yes. Yeah, I'm sure. Army personnel built it. Yeah.

[01:24:47]

In fact, another deal I have there is, I went—let's see. December—oh, when I was in Italy there in November, I got a letter from a friend of mine in England, where I had been before, up at 490th Bomb Group. He wrote me a letter, guy I knew, I flew with, and he told me that Kurmode's crew got shot down. And that was my best friend, Earl Dorr. December 5, 1944, on a mission to Berlin, Kurmode's crew was shot down. And it's 71 years ago, and they're still missing in action. So Dorr was killed, and I could have been on that crew. Remember, originally I said I could have been on Kurmode's crew, or I could have been on Carter's crew, and I decided to take Carter's crew instead of Kurmode's crew. And my good friend Dorr took Kurmode's crew, and he went down with that. He's been missing in action now for 71 years, yeah, still.

Healey: Okay. Did he—missing over—

Welch: Germany. They don't know what happened to them. They don't know if they bailed out, or if they crashed, or what. Or if they bailed out, and then the German people killed them and buried them, or if they bailed out and the German soldiers

killed them and buried them, you know. They don't know what happened. It's in the book that I have, tells about it a little bit. But anyhow, he's gone, too. So, let's see. On December 26, did I tell you about that?

Healey: No, go ahead.

Welch: I went to a mission in northern Italy, and up in the Po Valley area, we had to bomb a bridge or a railroad yard. I forget what it was. We were in formation, and we got hit by flak, and the number three engine, again, caught on fire. We fell out of formation. Number two engine got hit, and it was only producing about seventy percent of the power. And of course we thought we were going to get hit by fighters, but luckily they didn't hit us, and we fell out of formation, after we had dropped our bombs. And we either had to bail out or crash land, because we were losing altitude fast.

So we headed south, and we luckily got over the line that the Army held in Italy. We got south of there, and here they established a—a P-51 fighter base was just opened there. Just established. And they had rolled out chicken wire, we called it, for a strip. It was metal strip that they made for a runway. You can imagine big rolls of it. And P-51s could land on there, but we couldn't. With a bomber, we couldn't land on there, because it wouldn't be secure. But we had the option of bailing out or landing, crash landing. So we did. We crash landed on that metal runway. We had only part of our hydraulic brakes. We got our landing gear down, we got the nose wheel down, and by God, we landed on that damn thing and rolled off into the mud. The mud stopped us enough that we didn't flip over and blow up, and so we all survived.

Healey: Who was your pilot at that time?

Welch: Hard-Luck Pitts.

Healey: Hard-Luck Pitts.

Welch: Hard-Luck Pitts. A couple of months before that, he had ditched in the Adriatic, lost some of his crew members. And he survived and took over a crew later. Hard-Luck Pitts. That's what they [laughs] called him.

Healey: Okay. [Laughs] It sounds like he did okay by you that day.

Welch: Yeah. And by the way, as we got down there, we all survived. We got banged up a little bit, but we survived. And I counted the holes. It had 125 holes in the airplane. Number three engine was shot out, and number two engine was under power, but we survived. Ancona. We crashed landed at Ancona. Ancona's up in the northern part of Italy on the Adriatic coast. Ancona. A-N-C-O-N-A.

[01:30:18]

It's a resort city now. I looked it up on the Internet, but we crash landed at Ancona. It's on the Adriatic.

Healey: Okay. So your plane was basically kaput by then.

Welch: Yep.

Healey: Yeah. So how'd you get out of there?

Welch: Well, the group came from—the 376th, they sent a truck up there and picked us up.

Healey: In northern Italy.

Welch: Yeah. At this P-51 airbase that they just established.

Healey: So did you truck all the way back down to southern Italy, then?

Welch: Yep. Yep. In the back of a truck.

Healey: Oh. Well, okay.

Welch: Well, that's normal. [Both laugh]

Healey: That's a long way in the back of a truck. So, long ride back, I suspect. What did you see—[phone rings] let me ask you this. How many missions did you go on?

Welch: Twenty-eight I flew. Twenty-eight. I would have flown a full tour of thirty-five I needed to fly in order to have a tour, but because I crash landed, I had combat fatigue, and they held me back for awhile. They took me out. Well, I was still on flight pay. I still got paid, but I didn't fly for about a month. [phone rings]

Healey: Didn't fly for a month, and you stayed in—

Welch: Well, three weeks.

Healey: Three weeks?

Welch: Yeah. And they sent me to a rest camp for about a week. [Laughs] It's no big deal, you know.

Healey: Where was that rest camp? Do you recall?

Welch: It was at Brindisi. Brindisi in Italy. It's near Bari. Near our base. It wasn't too far. Some of the guys used to go Isle of Capri for a rest, but I went to Brindisi. Isle of Capri was off of Naples. It was a kind of resort area.

Healey: Did, after you crash landed, most of your crew have a week or two off, or not?

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: Yeah? Okay.

Welch: We had off a little bit, because they were kind of—it kind of gets you in the head. [Laughs]

Healey: Yes. When did that occur? When did you do the crash landing?

Welch: December 26, 1944. Day after Christmas.

Healey: That's right. Okay. But you flew missions after that?

Welch: Yep, mm-hmm.

Healey: Okay. You indicated you flew—[phone rings] let's see. You indicated you flew twenty-eight missions. Of those, how many times did your plane get shot?

Welch: Oh, we got shot at all the time. Almost. Maybe we had a few missions that we didn't get shot at, but you see, we would try to avoid municipalities or cities that had railroad yards or something, so we'd go around, and so we wouldn't get shot at. But we got shot at all the time, but they didn't hit us all the time, you know. But we got flak holes a lot. In fact, I had—[phone rings] it's Nick[?]. If it rings again, I'll tell him to—what were you asking?

Healey: Well, you said you got shot at all the time. You had flak holes, that sort of thing.

Welch: Well, yeah. We didn't get hit all the time, though, but we got shot at all the time. And then, you know, we were in formation. And you fly formation to protect one another, because we all have guns. And if you're alone, a fighter can knock you down, probably in a hurry if they're good. And so you fly together, and if you lose an engine or something, then you fall out of formation, and then you're kind of by yourself. And if you don't get something done quick or go someplace, you're in trouble if there's fighters around. But yeah, on the missions, you asked if we got shot at. We didn't come back every time with holes in our airplane, but we came back with hits a lot, often, with holes.

[01:35:07]

Healey: Were you flying high enough so that you were using oxygen most—

Welch: Oh, yeah. At ten thousand feet, we put on oxygen masks, and we had to have oxygen above ten thousand feet all the time.

Healey: If you had to parachute out, did you have oxygen? Would you have had oxygen with you, or not?

Welch: If you what?

Healey: If you had to bail out.

Welch: Oh, no. You wouldn't have any oxygen then, no. No, you'd just drop until you could make it. But when you—if you bailed out, chances are you got hit at maybe twenty-five thousand feet, and you'd be losing altitude, you'd be going down all the time anyhow. And so if you bailed out, you probably would be bailing out at fifteen thousand feet, and you'd be all right, you know. You could survive. You'd be cold, but you could survive.

Healey: When did you get word of the end of the war? The end of the war in Europe, I should say.

Welch: Yeah. Well, I don't know. We had a picture in the squadron of Mussolini hanging upside down in Rome. He was hanging up by his feet. [Laughs] It was in our orderly room. And I don't remember much about the end—oh, I was with Ellis Barthlet[sp??] at that time. I lived in a tent with him. And we had saved a couple bottles of beer to celebrate when the war ended, and so we drank the beer, I remember.

Healey: Oh, okay. After you got word that the war was coming to an end, and I don't know if that's when Hitler died, or Mussolini's death, or just what—

Welch: Well, Hitler, yeah.

Healey: Did you fly any more missions after that?

Welch: No. No, the war was over for us. Well, I flew back to—see, the war in Japan was still going on, you know, when the war in Europe ended first. And so we messed around until—I guess it was about June or something.

Healey: In Italy or back—

Welch: In Italy. In Italy, yeah. Then we—I was on captain—or lieutenant—yeah, Captain Brady's crew then, and we flew back to north Africa, and then back down to Dakar, and back across to Natal, and all the way up, but we took plenty of time going to central America. We stopped at Puerto Rico, and the Bahamas, and Trinidad, and Belém, and you know, because we had plenty of time to get back.

Healey: You stopped more than a day, or about a day, at each one of those places?

Welch: Yeah, we were celebrating.

Healey: Oh, okay. [Both laugh]

Welch: Through Central America.

Healey: So it wasn't just refueling. You actually got liberty time.

Welch: Yeah, we—let's go to Puerto Rico, and let's go to Bahamas, and so we did. Yeah, on the way back. And then we came back, also back into Fort Lauderdale, Florida, again. Then I went to—we took our plane up to Hunter Field, Georgia. There's a big army base there. I think that's what that air base is for. We dropped our plane off there, and then I got a thirty-day furlough to go home to Milwaukee. And I didn't have anybody there but my sister, but anyhow, I stayed there for thirty days. Then they shipped me to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and I was up there for a couple of weeks. I don't know what for. I was thinking about getting a job, even. But anyhow, then they shipped me to Deming, New Mexico. And they started training me in B-29s. And then the war ended, luckily. The Japanese—

Healey: Okay. So was there some thought that maybe you would be sent to the Pacific?

Welch: Yeah, yeah.

Healey: Yeah?

Welch: Yeah. You know, they needed flight engineers on B-29s. My brother-in-law was a B-29 pilot in World War II, but he didn't get over to Japan or Europe—I mean, the Far East. I started one day training in the B-29. And then the war ended.

Healey: The war ended, and you were discharged by October?

Welch: I was discharged. Yeah, October, I think it was, in 1945, yeah.

[01:40:02]

Healey: Where were you when you were discharged?

Welch: Fort Sheridan.

Healey: Oh, back in Fort Sheridan.

Welch: Yeah, I was at Deming, New Mexico, actually, and I was down there with—they wanted me to be on KP, and I says, "I ain't being on KP." And I wasn't. Then I

got to know, I think he was the order[??]—first sergeant or something down there. I met him at a bar or something, and I says, “When these guys come around and wake me up, you fix it so I don’t get woke up.” And by God, he did. And they came around and woke everybody in that particular barracks but me. I mean, they woke me up because they were there making noise, but, “How come you don’t have to go Welch?” I just laid there, you know. [Laughs] But anyhow, I was protected because I had met this first sergeant at the bar in Deming, New Mexico. It was kind of fun. Then when the war ended there, I was with two other guys, and they shipped us by train to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, Chicago. And we stayed in Chicago for a couple of days before we went to Fort Sheridan. We met a guy, and he drove us around the city, and celebration and all that stuff. And bought us all the drinks we wanted, took us everywhere. God, he’d park his car right in the street and walk us in there. There wasn’t much traffic then, because—

Healey: Was that a service member, or just a—no?

Welch: No, he was just some old guy. I don’t know who he was. I remember he took care of us. Took us to this show, and we saw—what were those three girls that used to sing? Two or three girls. They were popular. They’re probably dead now, but they used to—well, they took us to the show, and we were all drunk, [laughs] you know. But anyhow, it was kind of fun.

Healey: Something I didn’t ask you about. You mentioned you got a letter at some juncture from a friend of yours in England. Did you get many letters from back home, or—

Welch: Yeah, my sister would send me letters. Then I had two younger brothers, and one of them was so young that they took, I think it was twenty-two dollars, out of my pay all the time I was in the service, and then they added, I think eighteen dollars and sent it. That was an allotment for him, because he was so young and didn’t have any parents. Yeah, my sister wrote to me a lot. In fact, I still have most of the letters. Let’s see, how do I have—oh, no. I have the—she kept the ones that I sent to her. Yeah, I have those. But they don’t say much, because we couldn’t write much, because we had them censored. They censored all the mail that we shipped, because they didn’t want you telling what you’re doing.

Healey: In fact, you said you got a letter from England from one of the guys that you knew there.

Welch: Yeah, I got that—

Healey: Was he able to tell you much in the letter?

Welch: Well, he’s the one that sent me from—he had my address in Italy, APO number, and he sent me that letter with regard to the fact that Kurmode’s crew went down,

and Earl Dorr was on there, my good friend. He notified me of that. In fact, I think I still have the letter.

Healey: So he was allowed to put that in a letter, the fact that a crew went down.

Welch: Sure. But you couldn't talk about, I went to Berlin and we had fifty airplanes, or whatever, and we got hit. You couldn't write anything like that. That was all censored.

Healey: Something you wrote on your intake questionnaire, and maybe you covered this already, but I want to make sure I ask you. It says that you were going to talk about the time when your life was saved. Was that—were you referring to when somebody ran out and said, "I'm not sick, I can"—

Welch: Yeah. Yeah, that's—I was referring to that. Because I would have been gone. I would have got on that plane, and after I got on that plane, you can't see the pitot tubes from where you are, so you wouldn't know that the covers were still on, so I would have went, you know. It would have been the end, yeah. And that, and then of course when I crash landed, we could have all died on that crash landing, but we luckily went in the mud and got stalled enough to stop. But we were all shot up. A hundred and twenty-five holes in the airplane. Yep. That's a lot of damage.

[01:45:10]

Healey: So that plane—and again, that plane was done. It wasn't flown again. Or did they cannibalize it and take parts out of it, or no?

Welch: I don't know what they did with that. That was way up north from us, so I don't know. Number ninety-two. It's in the—I got a book, you know, of the 376th Bomb Group and the 490th, and it tells about number ninety-two that crash landed at Ancona. It's in there. And I forgot the pilot, and so what I did, I wrote a note to one of the guys that published that book, and he said, "Well, yeah, that was Tough-Luck Pitts, was the pilot." Hard-Luck Pitts, Tough-Luck Pitts. He's the guy that had previously ditched in the Adriatic with another crew and lost three or four guys, once he got back to flying.

Healey: So when you were coming back, and toward the end of the war before you were discharged, you were in Chicago. Somebody met you and took you around for a while. Then did you get discharged?

Welch: Yep. I went right to Fort Sheridan, and they do whatever they have to do, you know, and they discharged me. I was only there, I don't know, three or four days, probably.

Healey: Where did you go after you were discharged?

Welch: After I was discharged, I took a bus or a train to Milwaukee. Then I got a room for seven dollars a month. I lived alone then, you know. I didn't have anybody. And then I—

Healey: You still had a sister in the area?

Welch: Yeah. And my two brothers moved back to Viroqua. Or one brother moved back to Viroqua, and one was—yeah, both of them moved back to Viroqua.

Healey: Had your mother passed away?

Welch: Oh, yeah. She passed away when I was eighteen, before I went in the service.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Welch: They were all gone. But anyhow, I lived alone there in Milwaukee, and I rented a room, seven dollars a month, on Marshall Street. And then I thought, "What the hell am I going to do?" I didn't want to go back to work at that photo finishing place, so I asked a few people, and I went to the Milwaukee School of Engineering, and I enrolled there. And at the same time, I go out on the Arandell lithography plant, and I got an apprenticeship job there, full-time apprenticeship in a lithography plant.

Healey: Are you saying photography or lithography [*sic*]?

Welch: Lithography.

Healey: Lithography. Okay.

Welch: You know, that's like that big outfit that's around here now. What is it that makes all the magazines? They got a big plant in Hartford. Anyhow, I started an apprenticeship there. I was working there full-time, and then I started school at Milwaukee School of Engineering. And then I found out that Como Photo Company in Watertown was for sale. And I knew of it. That was a photo finishing plant, also. And so I knew a guy that knew of it, and I got a hold of him, and he took me out here to Watertown. And he and I bought the plant. [Laughs] I had just started school, and I had just started in a full-time job, and he and I bought Como Photo Service here in Watertown, in 1946. Yep. And we bought it.

Healey: Where'd you get the money to do that?

Welch: I had fifteen hundred dollars saved because I gambled in the service, and I had sent it home, and my sister kept it in the savings account. I had fifteen hundred bucks. We bought this plant for three thousand dollars. He put fifteen hundred in, and I put fifteen hundred in, and we bought it.

Healey: And where did you meet this guy, your partner?

Welch: Well, I knew him from when I worked in Milwaukee at that photo finishing plant. Stanley Stevens[sp??]. His real name was Stanus—Stanley—Stanus—Stanalowski[sp??] or something. He was a Polish guy. [Both laugh] But anyhow, he and I bought it, and then I took over, started working. I had five, six employees working. I'm just twenty-one, twenty-two years old, I guess. I took it over. And I operated it for fifty-seven years.

[01:50:06]

And well, anyhow, I worked six months initially, and old Stevens, Stanley, he wouldn't come out to help me, so I says, "Look, Stan. You buy me out or I buy you out." And so he came out, and we went across the street in the saloon, and I wrote down, I'd pay you this much for it. He wrote down, I'll pay you this much for it. And I outbid him, so I bought his side out after six months. I took over the whole company after that time, because he wouldn't come out here and help me, you know. And then I operated it for fifty-seven years, my son and I. We processed as many as a thousand rolls of film a day, we used to. We had thirty-four people working at one time. We had stores in Madison.

Healey: And you kept the same name, Como?

Welch: Yep.

Healey: It was a K or a C?

Welch: C-O-M-O. We had stores in Madison. I bought—this guy that owned it originally, he was from Austria, and the company was started in 1918. And he operated it until 1946, and I took it over. But—

Healey: So that's how you got to Watertown.

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: And you stayed there.

Welch: [Both laugh] Isn't that funny?

Healey: And you got married?

Welch: Yeah, I got married just two weeks before I came out here, 1946, I got—February 13. I came out here. Let's see. I got married on February 13, and I came out here on March 1 and took over the company. Then she came out a week later, I guess, something like that.

Healey: So your wife was from Milwaukee?

Welch: Yeah. Yeah. She was from Milwaukee. Bay View, if you're familiar with Milwaukee.

Healey: A little bit, but yeah. [Both laugh]

Welch: It's down on the south side, down near Humboldt Park. But anyhow, that's the way it was. Then we, my son and I, sold the company twelve years ago. We sold Como Photo Company twelve years ago. And then that guy that took it over, he didn't do that well, and he went bankrupt after two years. And I had been there fifty-seven years. And he still owes some money to my son that he'll never get, you know, bankruptcy.

Healey: So initially you had enrolled in school, you indicated, in Milwaukee. Were you using or going to use veteran's benefits to pay for that, or—

Welch: Yeah, I suppose. I think I had that available to me, yeah.

Healey: And you started a business, so you never went back to school, or not?

Welch: No. I educated myself. [Laughs] I had to. But I got educated pretty well, I think, because I was in business, and I had to take care of it. Yeah, I started only one day at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. I forget where it is now. I think it's on Milwaukee Street. But anyhow, then I had a full-time job, too, with that lithographer, and if I had would have not got this Como Photo, I probably would be a lithographer today, or I might have went to school at the Milwaukee School of Engineering and did something, or I might have went to Marquette or someplace. I had the opportunity.

Healey: During the war, did much change? Did you notice much changes back here in the United States?

Welch: Well, I know they didn't have any gasoline. But I know when I got the thirty-day furlough, that company that I worked for there in there in Milwaukee, the Cook Company, they let me use a car, and I had their gasoline, so I had something at that time. But yeah—

Healey: But tough to buy cars otherwise.

Welch: Yeah, I don't think they had any automobiles. No new cars were built, I don't think, during the war, you know. I don't know much about it. I was gone all the time, '42 to '45. Yeah. Yeah.

[01:55:07]

Healey: Now you've mentioned during this interview that you did keep in contact with, and you went to some of the reunions. So did some of the people that you flew—on the flight crews that you flew on, did they show up at the reunions, too?

Welch: Yep, yep.

Healey: And besides that, did you correspond with them?

Welch: Somewhat.

Healey: Somewhat?

Welch: Yeah, I got to know them well enough that I'd send greeting cards with them. And I know they're all gone now, but I had a good friend, Chuck Cormeer. He was our radio operator. He came from San Diego, and he died here about three years ago. And I visited him in San Diego. He originally came from Detroit. And then Maves—he's got a picture on that pillow over there. He died three months ago, and he was from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. And he originally was from Wisconsin, and so he used to go from Broken Arrow to Wisconsin every year, and he'd stop and visit me.

And then when I was in Italy, I got to know—oh, what's his name? He lived in Alabama, and I visited him. In fact, I visited Schifflet's mother and father in Alton, Alabama, after the war, too. He was the one that we buzzed his house, and he's the one that was killed in England. That was their only kid. I visited him. They lived in an old house down there. His dad worked in a drugstore in Birmingham, and I visited him, too. Then the tail gunner, Gus Larson, Glen Larson, he lived in Iowa, and I visited their family, too, years ago, after the war.

But then we had these reunions, and the crews were there, the pilots were there. Jim Fuller was there, the prisoner of war. I didn't meet Mikita. He was a prisoner of war, too. I never saw him at a meeting. Maves was there, and Fuller was there, and Cormeer was there, and I was there, and all the other crews. We had, like, twelve, fifteen crews in each squadron, and there were four squadrons in a group. It was the 490th Bomb Group. Yeah, it's interesting, but now there's nobody left anymore. But they still do have the—I think they still have a meeting.

Healey: The 490th—is that disbanded now?

Welch: I think it's still available. I mean, I think somebody's still operating it, yeah.

Healey: Okay. All right. Losing my train of thought a little bit here.

Welch: You can ask me anything, Ellen.

Healey: Okay. Did you—you met with your reunions. Did you get involved in any military organizations back here in Watertown?

Welch: American Legion and VFW. That's all. I've been an American Legion member for sixty-eight years, I think. One of the oldest. [Laughs] Yeah, I joined when—I joined in 1947, I think, American Legion.

Healey: And I note from your shirt that you've gone on the honor flight. When did you go on the honor flight?

Welch: I think it was three years ago last July.

Healey: And how did you hear about that?

Welch: Somebody from Port Washington notified me. That's where they originally started, I think. These flights originally came out of Port Washington. I don't know how they started. And it might have been four years ago that I went. Anyhow, three or four years ago. They pick you up. You know what they do. They pick you up real early in the morning. We went to Milwaukee.

[01:59:59]

Healey: Did you have a sponsor? Did somebody go with you?

Welch: Yeah. I forget who it was, but I had somebody that paid five hundred dollars, I think, to sponsor me. They go with you, yeah. Then you go to Washington. And I remember when we got there, they had fire engines there shooting water out [laughs] as the plane landed.

Healey: Why?

Welch: Can you imagine? The plane is taxiing into the terminal, and—

Healey: That doesn't sound good to me.

Welch: No, well, they just had—instead of firing guns, they had fire engines shooting water out at you to welcome you.

Healey: Oh, okay. That's good.

Welch: And God, when we got to Washington, I'll betcha there was a thousand people there that met us at the station. Then when we got back to Milwaukee, there was a thousand people there, met us at the Milwaukee terminal. We didn't get back until about nine o'clock at night. We were there all day long. It was kind of interesting, you know. I had never been to Washington before.

Healey: Oh, I was just about to ask you if you'd ever seen the memorial there, the World War II memorial, but you've never been to Washington, D.C.

Welch: Never been there before, but of course I visited that. There are some pictures. And I got a—they furnished a book with my pictures in there, you know, and that stuff. It's interesting.

Healey: Yeah, yeah.

Welch: I got a couple of friends here in Watertown that have gone there, too. In fact, they take guys now from Korea, and Vietnam, even, I think. But it's interesting. Let's see. What else can I—I don't know.

Healey: Well, that's kind of a—for some people, besides seeing the World War II memorial for the World War II vets, and the Korean memorial, it's kind of, again, a welcoming home. Was there any welcome home when you came home from World War II, that you recall? In Milwaukee, or no?

Welch: No.

Healey: You just went home and—

Welch: In fact, when we turned our airplane over at Hunter Field, Georgia, that was—well, we came into Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and nobody greeted us or anything. I didn't care about that. But then we went to Hunter Field, Georgia, and nobody greeted us either, but they made us a steak. The mess hall. We got in there during the off meal hours, and so they made us a steak, I remember. But nothing happened. We just got on a train and went home. I never had anybody greet us. [Laughs]

Healey: Okay. In the course of your life, have you talked to any school groups or other people about your—

Welch: No. I'm not a very good communicator. I'm not a very good communicator.

Healey: I think you sell yourself short. [Laughs]

Welch: I don't know. I—

Healey: You know, you're one of the few World War II veterans left that can speak as well as you do and have the memory that you do.

Welch: I still have my goings-on yet, you know. But I never told anybody about my service. My wife didn't know anything about it until my grandsons got to be about fifteen years old.

Healey: Well, she knew you were in the service, didn't she?

Welch: She knew, and she went to a couple of reunions with me, too, and she knew about that, yeah. But I never told anybody about it, until my grandsons started asking me about it, and then other guys asked me about it. Did you ever read that book, *A Higher Call*?

Healey: I don't think I have, no.

Welch: It's a good book. *A Higher Call*. It's about a German fighter pilot, and a B-17 pilot that got shot up, and the German fighter pilot came up to it real close, and he could have shot it down in a minute, because it was all banged up. The one guy on the crew was dead. That German pilot, fighter pilot, he could have—

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Welch: —shot it down, but he let it go. He had a higher call, you know. He was playing with his rosary, and he had a higher call. And he flew right up to it, and he motioned to the pilot and kind of communicated with him. And he could have shot it down in a minute, but he let it get back to England. And it got back to England, and forty-six years later, that B-17 pilot met this German airman, fighter pilot. And they had communication for a couple of years. They're both dead now. But if that German fighter pilot would have notified his group back there where he came from in Germany, they'd have shot him instantly, but he let that B-17 go. He could have shot it down.

Healey: I have not read that book, but I think I've heard about it.

Welch: Yeah. It's a real good book. Interesting to me, at least, because this German pilot—I forget his name now—shot down over three hundred American, British, Polish aircraft in World War II, and he survived, that German pilot. Shot down four B-17s in one day over Italy, and I was in Italy at that time. And they were shot down over Graz, and I went to Graz twice. So he didn't get our group. He got some other group, and he got four B-17s on one day. That's forty guys. It's a good book. *A Higher Call*. It's a good book.

Healey: I'll look it up. You said you really didn't talk much about your service until your grandsons asked you about it.

Welch: Yeah, they were about fifteen years old.

Healey: Okay. What sort of questions did they ask you?

Welch: Well, they just wanted to know where I was, and what I did. I didn't tell them all of this stuff, but I—they don't know it all yet, but—they don't know as much as you do, I guess. [Laughs]

Healey: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about, or that you haven't talked about, that you would like to add, whether it's—well, anything? An experience, a story? Another friend that you may have lost track of or lost in the war?

Welch: Well, I know all my crew is gone, and most of all the other crew members are gone. I can't think of anything else, Ellen, that I wanted to add. You know, things happen all the time.

Healey: How was your life changed by being in the war?

Welch: I don't know. I think I got disciplined, because I didn't have any parents and didn't have anybody, and so I had to do something. And then all my friends are being drafted at that time, and that's why I went down to that induction center to ask them a question. That's all I went for. Ask them a question, how do you get in the Air Force if you want to? I'm in the Air Force the same day. [Both laugh] That's different.

Healey: That's probably a better response than you get to most inquiries, [laughs] whether it's this day and age, or a quicker response.

Welch: You know, the military probably makes it different in some ways, I'm sure, because you have to do what they tell you to do. All the airmen in World War II were volunteers. Our loss rate was twenty—I think it was twenty-nine percent. We lost more personnel—we had more casualties in World War II in the air war than the Marine Corps had in World War II, just in the air war. It was tough. But they all can tell you the same stories, because there was so many of us, and so many of them were gone. The Air Force, you know about that. That's printed regular. They lost sixty bombers one day. On Schweinfurt—

Healey: Hmm. I didn't know that.

[00:04:52]

Welch: On mission to Schweinfurt in 1943. They lost 60 B-24s and B-17s in one day, and there's ten guys on each one. That's six hundred guys in one day.

Healey: And that's a mission to where?

Welch: Schweinfurt. That's—a lot of people know about that. That's a lot of people, you know, that don't come back that one day. Yeah, I had in, in my bed in Italy—it would get kind of cold at night once in awhile, and I had about ten blankets on it. [Laughs] I did. Because if a crew went down, we'd go over there, and if you needed some army blankets, you'd take them. So I had about ten of them. [Laughs]

Healey: Wow. Wow.

Welch: Yeah, that—it's fun. In fact, in Italy there one time, we lived on these army cots. You know what they are. And somebody had a roll of film, and they knew I was involved and knew something about film processing, so I go down to the photo lab at the squadron headquarters there, and I get some developer, and I get some fixer. That's chemicals that you use in film processing. And so I go back to the tent, and I get this developer down under the bed, and I get the fix down under the bed, and I get down under the bed, and this guy's got this roll of film there. And I take it out, the roll of film, unroll it from a paper roll, you know how they used to be, and I processed it underneath the tent—underneath the bed, just lying in there.

Healey: That's your darkroom.

Welch: I developed it under there in total darkness. And I did it right, because I knew how to handle it, and I fixed it so it wouldn't get damaged from light again. And then I turned—got out of under the bed, and processed it out, washed it out. Nice roll of film. Sent it home and got it developed. Or he sent it home and got it printed. Yeah, that was interesting. [Laughs]

Healey: One of the things you said to me before we started, as I came in for the interview, is that you go downtown and you talk to some of the guys who were just a couple years younger than you, or maybe the same age, and one of the things is that you kind of missed your teenage years or your early years, because you were—yeah.

Welch: Well, yeah. Those guys talk about monkeying around with all these girls when they're eighteen, [both laugh] nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. Where am I? I'm in Miami Beach, or England, or Italy. So I got deprived of all of that stuff. [Laughs]

Healey: Well, Miami Beach isn't so bad, [laughs] and southern California.

Welch: Yeah, but you didn't have much time to do anything down there, meet anybody. In fact, there were civilians at that time on the beach. The Army Air Force didn't take over all the hotels, but they took over quite a few of them. There wasn't much activity down there. And they had the blackouts down, too, at Miami Beach when I was there. It was all blacked out, because they had—supposedly Germans were offshore at that time. I don't know.

Healey: Well, you also mentioned you were usually kind of busy with your training schedule. Did your training serve you well, or did you learn a lot of it kind of on the job when you were over making the missions?

Welch: Well, I learned quite a little at Keesler Field, in San Diego, and gunnery school, of course. You had to learn all that stuff. And after you learn it, then you apply it. I don't know. You don't think about much of anything when you're flying. You're trying to get there and get back, and you don't complain about anything. You're

all volunteers. I never heard anybody complain about going on a mission, no matter where they were going. You know, they didn't complain. It was your job. You had to do it.

Healey: Now, you've mentioned just a few minutes ago that you really didn't talk much about your service, oh, probably for fifty years or more. Why did you decide to do this oral interview? What was important enough for you to want to do it?

[00:09:55]

Welch: I don't know. I got talking about it in the last ten years, and it's kind of interesting. And some people like to know about it, you know, and as far as your museum, if they get my records and this guy's records, you could talk to another airman and he could tell you the same stuff I'm telling you. There's a lot of them that can tell you the same stories. They're the same. They went through it all. It was tough. It was an—interesting, I think, and it's probably part of history that should be recorded, but there's so many from airmen from World War II that you want to run into some more yet, if you can. I don't know of any.

Healey: Oh, I sure would like to, and there probably aren't as many as you think. I don't know how many were in your—you went on the honor flight three or four years ago.

Welch: But how many are left? I mean, there must have been, overall, airmen in World War II, there must have been probably six, seven hundred thousand, probably. I'm talking about B-17, B-24 pilots, P-51s, P-58s, P-47s. They were all escort planes for us. B-25s, B-26s. God, there must have been six, seven hundred thousand airmen in World War II. The war that started in Africa, originally, north Africa, then into Italy, then up into France and Germany, and flying out of England. God, I don't know how many groups there were in World War II, air groups, but God, there must have been—in England, there must have been how many? There must have been probably thirty or forty air groups, and each one had about fifteen hundred people in it, and about half of them were airmen. And then in Italy, they had thirty, forty groups with fifteen hundred men in each group, and about six hundred airmen, probably.

And then after they flew twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty missions, they'd go back home. Somebody else had to take their place. There must have been six, seven hundred thousand airmen in World War II. I don't know. There must be that statistic someplace. There's some of them left yet. I don't know of any locally, but there's some of them left, and if you could make some inquiries, you could still find a few. Haven't you talked to any other airmen?

Healey: A few, yes.

Welch: They tell me—don't they tell the same stories I'm telling?

Healey: Everyone has a different story to tell, and so—

Welch: Yeah, but were they on missions like me?

Healey: Some were, yes.

Welch: Well, they got to say it basic—it's pretty basic. You got up at three o'clock in the morning, get briefed.

Healey: One gentleman that I talked to, I think he was shot down on his third mission, and he was in a POW camp, so his experience ended fairly shortly. And then—

Welch: Yeah, I know a fellow here in Watertown. He's dead now, but he was shot down in his first mission. And in fact, Glen Larson, my tail gunner from Iowa, he was on his second mission when he got shot down. So he couldn't probably tell you the story I could tell you, but he's gone, anyhow. But anyhow, there's got to be a few around yet that you could talk to, and they'd be telling you a similar story.
[Laughs]

Healey: And we look for them. If they want to talk to us, we're more than happy to add their stories to the circumstance[??].

Welch: I'll mention that around, and if I think somebody would be appropriate to talk to you, I'll suggest it.

Healey: Well, thank you. Well, I don't have any other questions to ask. We've been going for probably a little over two hours.

Welch: Huh. Well, you're an interesting interviewer. I was sweating this thing out, because I'm not that good at it, but I got by it, thank God.

Healey: And you didn't need to. The toughest thing was World War II, not this interview.
[Both laugh] I want to thank you for doing the interview as well as for your service, because those were tough times.

Welch: Yeah, they were.

Healey: So, appreciate it. Not just you, but all the people you served with.

[00:14:56]

Welch: Yeah. It was interesting. Those poor guys. In fact, I remember flying over Normandy. I was in the St. Lo breakthrough, they called it. We went there twice. We dropped incendiaries and shrapnel on troops on the St. Lo breakthrough. And I remember flying along there in the top turret, and here's a B-24 landing gear

over there. One landing gear in the air. Plane got hit and I could see it. I couldn't see down below, but I saw it, one landing gear. The plane got hit, and anyhow, the St. Lo breakthrough. And then flying across the Channel, and all those—every hundred yards there was a boat.

Healey: Oh, you saw that.

Welch: I saw that. Every hundred yards. God, there were just thousands of them the Channel there, that were about to land, or hopefully. Bringing in tanks and troops and everything. It was interesting to see that. I forgot to mention that. That's—

Healey: How many missions did you fly on either D-Day or right after that? That was a D-Day mission?

Welch: I didn't fly on D-Day at all, but after that, let's see. I think I flew on about—let's see. D-Day was June 6, and I think I flew on June 10 or 11.

Healey: And still a lot of ships going [inaudible]?

Welch: Oh, yeah. Constantly. Yeah. But Gus Larson, my tail gunner, he flew on June 7, and he got killed on June 7th. Yeah, that—we had to have visual. We couldn't drop like they do now, through clouds. We had to have no cloud cover, or we couldn't drop, because if there were troops there, you'd kill your own troops. That happened in Normandy there. They killed a general, if you remember, bombing. In fact, D-Day, we were ready to fly. I was ready to go on D-Day, but the weather was bad over the target, so our group didn't fly that day.

Healey: Do you recall what your target was that day?

Welch: God, I don't know what it would be. No, I don't remember.

Healey: Well, now, you said you had to have visual, or eyes on target. I don't know how high you were flying. Were there any other things you remember seeing from that far up, or from wherever you were—whatever altitude you were, that you recall?

Welch: No, that's the only landing gear I saw. That's the only plane that I saw that had just got hit. That's the only one I ever saw like that.

Healey: Were you usually flying over cities? Were your targets in cities, or shipyards, or—

Welch: Yeah. We had railroad yards, factories, and they were over cities. And those cities were well-defended with flak guns. They had 88s and, what was it, 155 millimeter? I forget what the German artillery was, but they were accurate. In fact, one day I was flying over, I think it was France or Belgium, and here I saw a 262. That's a German jet. That's the first German jet. In fact, one of the first jets

ever made. And they were up there, our level, and I think they were getting our altitude so they could call them to the ground and tell what altitude we were at. German 262 fighter plane. They only made about two hundred of them, but that pilot that I was talking about in that book that I was talking about, he flew one of them once. But he indicated that the material that they made them from was not of a quality that the engine would last very long. They had to change engines after thirty, forty hours. But anyhow, they didn't get many made. But if Germany would have developed that jet plane sooner, and used it in combat, God, they'd have shot us all down. It was a real good one, and very fast. You can read about that, too. You can hear about that somewhat.

[00:19:58]

Healey: Now that jet that they had. Was that armed, or not?

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: It was. And the reason I asked you is because you thought they were calling in your altitude.

Welch: Yeah. Well, he was alone, and I think they probably—he was just maybe on a training mission or something, or he just went up to get our altitude to radio it back down. For our altitude. You see, that flak had come up, and it was designated to explode at that altitude. I can remember feeling a—it was so close to us, the concussion from one round. God, it must have been only a few yards away, and just knocked the plane way out of formation, the concussion only from a flak round. I can feel that yet.

It was tough. But we got through it, so—but lost a lot of guys. Lots of them. That one group I was telling about, Schweinfurt, can you imagine that group coming back? Four hundred guys. There's only, like I say, five, six hundred airmen in a group, and here four hundred of them probably didn't come back that day. That's a shame to lose all those guys, but that happens.

Healey: Well, as you mentioned, about twenty-nine percent loss. That's a large[??]—

Welch: I think it was about twenty-nine percent with casualties, prisoners of war, and killed. Yeah, that's pretty high.

Healey: Mm-hmm. Okay. Well, again, I appreciate it, and I thank you very much.

Welch: Well, thank you, Ellen. I don't—I'm not very good at this, but hopefully you can use something from it that you can [laughs]—

Healey: People in the future will. They definitely will. At least I hope somebody looks at these interviews. Lots of valuable material.

Welch: Yeah, I talked to my granddaughter yesterday, the one that had to move to Poughkeepsie, New York. I told her about this. I was sweating it out. And she says, “Oh, you can handle it.” She says, “Would it be possible if, after that, if I could ever get a copy of it?” [laughs] Well, maybe I could let her see one.

Healey: We’ll make that happen. You’ll get a couple of copies, yes, of the audio, so, yeah.

Welch: Good, good. She’d appreciate that, yeah. Yeah. She lost her dad here, thirty-three[??]—two months ago.

Healey: Your son.

Welch: Yeah.

Healey: I guess I didn’t ask you. How many children did you have?

Welch: I had two, a son and a daughter. My daughter moved to California. She had three boys, and one of them was killed in an automobile accident. That’s too bad. He was six foot seven inches tall. Picture of him over there. He’d come in the house here. I’d tell him, “Keep your hands off the ceiling.” [Both laugh] He could put it up there flat on the ceiling. But he’s gone, yeah.

Healey: Alrighty. Turn this off. Thanks again.

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