

# NELS GUNNAR FRANSEN

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## NELS GUNNAR FRANSEN

Today is June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson and I am a volunteer at Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with the statewide efforts to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office at Midway Village and Museum Center. We are interviewing Mr. Gunnar Fransen. Mr. Fransen served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

**NELSON:** Gunnar, would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Give us your full name and place and date of birth. We would also like the names of each one of your parents. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**FRANSEN:** My name is Nels Gunner Frankness and I now reside in Rockford, Illinois. My parents were Noels and Helena Frankness who had emigrated from the Scandinavian countries. I have a brother, Norman, who resides here in Rockford plus my immediate family, 2 children and 4 grandchildren. That constitutes my side of my family. It is just my brother and I who reside in the United States. All the other relatives on my side still reside in the Scandinavian countries.

**NELSON:** Can you tell me the date of your birth?

**FRANSEN:** I was born February 10, 1924.

**NELSON:** Okay. Thank you. Entering the military what was life like before the war and specifically during 1941?

**FRANSEN:** Prior to my entering into military service, I was a senior in high school and graduated in 1942 which means that the war commenced during my senior year. At the time I was fortunate to have been enrolled in the ROTC program. My first knowledge of the United States being involved in the war in December 1941, is a memory I'll never forget because I happened to be at the intersection of Broadway and 20<sup>th</sup> Streets on the way to church. I heard it over the radio and I'll never forget that particular time and that particular spot.

**NELSON:** Was that December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941?

**FRANSEN:** That was December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941.\

**NELSON:** Had you formed any prior opinions or any feelings about what was taking place in Europe and Asia?

**FRANSEN:** I didn't have a particular feeling bias one way or another but I understood what was taking place. I also understood that at my age of 18, at that time, that we could pretty much project that 8 out of 10 young men that age would be into the military service.

**NELSON:** Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe?

**FRANSEN:** Yes, I recall some of those accounts.

**NELSON:** Did you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

**FRANSEN:** I followed Hitler's reactions that go back to the 1936 Olympics when he very graphically snubbed Jesse Owens who won 4 gold medals. I also recall very clearly

the quote "arrogance" of the young people which, I think they called them something like the — I can't recall — Hitler's Youth Movement. That was very impressionable. The other thing that was quite apparent, to my perspective at that early age, it appeared that probably the only professional military organization in the world.. The rest of them were civilians in military clothes.

**NELSON:** And you volunteered in the Air Force, right?

**FRANSEN:** Yes, on completion of high school in 1942, I went to school in Nebraska and in September I got my first draft notice. By October I got my second one, which told me that they were serious and meant business. Some of my colleagues in school and I hitchhiked to Omaha, Nebraska, and we enlisted in the Air Corp Pilot Training Program. That was in November of 1942.

**NELSON:** Do you have any specific memories of this event?

**FRANSEN:** During my enlistment?

**NELSON:** Yes.

**FRANSEN:** Yes, very graphically, because at that time schools were not as large in number as they are today. Consequently the faculty and staff formed quick opinions. I recall very vividly that they didn't think that I could muster or pass the entrance exams at that early age of 18. So I cut class and went and passed it and they said, You meet the qualifications for pilot training on the written exams.

**NELSON:** What happened after you were inducted? Where were you sent?

**FRANSEN:** After I was sworn in. they sent me to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where I had sixweeks of basic military indoctrination training. That was a memory that I think it was Walter Winchill that said "There were two hellholes. One was Jefferson Barracks and the other was in Germany.

**NELSON:** What did you think of the training?

**FRANSEN:** The training was rather interesting. There was a road that bisected that induction camp. On one side were 10,000 of us who had taken over the colleges. On the other side of the road was about the same number who were basically illiterate draftees and it was November, December and January were cold bitter months there and we lost an awful lot of colleagues to spinal meningitis.

**NELSON:** Tell us about military camps you attended.

**FRANSEN:** I found leaving Jefferson Barracks, they sent me to Moorhead, Minnesota. At that time it was a teachers' college. They wanted me to have a crash course of three months in certain subjects that I hadn't had primary things like speech. They wanted me to have a little bit more English. I had taken mathematics and calculus. I didn't have to do that. They wanted me to have some medical, first aid type things. And also they wanted me to have ten hours of piper cub to be sure that I wasn't anti-air minded.

**NELSON:** Tell us about your leaves and passes.

**FRANSEN:** They were really non-existent. Leaving Moorhead, Minnesota, I went to Santa Ana, California. This was called pre-flight. This was all around school and at that time they were so short of pilots that they

pushed us. I completed twelve weeks there. then I moved on to primary flying which was our first introduction into flying where you do your solo work. That was at Lincoln Aeronautical Academy in Tolera(?), California. That was a private school contracted by the Armed Forces. We had civilian instructors but the military personnel ran the base center. From there I moved across the road a ways to Ramor, California, where I was introduced into the largest single engine plane which meant introductions to night flying, radio controls and so forth which was the basic part of my flying. Upon completion of that they sent me to Fort Sumner(?), New Mexico, for \_\_\_?\_\_\_ engines and we flew U-708s which were the twin engine aircraft and where we developed the skill for multi-engine plus we got into night flying cross-country navigation. Upon completion of that phase, which was advanced, then I was commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant and received my pilot license.

**NELSON:** When and where were you sent overseas?

**FRANSEN:** Let me go back and give you a brief interlude here because that has an effect on where and why I was sent overseas. About receiving my wings, I was sent to Austin, Texas, for troop carrier training but upon arriving in Austin, they were behind schedule so they were setting up a new Experimental School to cut your training from five months to three. This was in Laurelton(?), Missouri. We were the first class to come in there. We received brand new C47Bs and we started training immediately and the training consisted of \_\_\_?\_\_\_ to flying not to exceed five hundred feet, lot of cross country training. I recall leaving Rolon, Missouri, and flying to a place in Pennsylvania, and I was monitored and the plane was not

to exceed five hundred feet above the ground. If I got over five hundred feet they'd chewed me out, "Get her down." And then we also received ten hours in American gliders so that we would have an understanding and appreciation for them and feel for what glider pilots we were to tow and how the gliders reacted to the importance of release, altitude and this type of thing. It was heavy concentration on the take off and landings. We thought, for awhile, they were training us to take off from an aircraft carrier. So we had to get off the ground "hold the bridge", wide open throttles, get off the ground as quick as we could and we also had to drop in real quick. A lot of it was night flying but we never knew what our destination was. I found completion of that phase which was approximately three months. I immediately ... I didn't even get a three-day pass. I got orders immediately two days in route to Fort Wayne, Indiana, which was a troop carrier base there also. I was to pick up a brand new aircraft and fly it overseas. I got there, reported and I had my crew and I left the next day for West Palm Beach, Florida, via the Caribbean, South America, Ascension Island and over Africa and follow the coast up into French Morocco on into Tunisia and I joined the outfit in Southern Italy.

**NELSON:** How many people in your crew?

**FRANSEN:** There were four, my co-pilot, radio operator and my, I call him crew chief.

**NELSON:** You did your own navigation?

**FRANSEN:** I did my own navigation but once joining a squadron, we had three navigators for the total squadron and they generally — in group formations, they generally flew with the commanding officer. On individual flights, I never had a navigator. I did my own navigation.

**NELSON:** What were you assigned to after arriving?

**FRANSEN:** Upon joining the combat unit, I was assigned to ride co-pilot to get indoctrinated into the squadron activities. I probably flew co-pilot for a couple of months. In later years I found out that they were very particular who they moved into that left seat and so consequently when I joined the squadron I had an advantage over a lot of other ones who hadn't gone through this experimental school that I had gone through. I was in the left seat very shortly and most of our flying over there was at night. It was all tree top level in between the mountains and lot of those individual flights were hit and run, get in behind and get the goods to the partisans and so on.

**NELSON:** What did you think of the nations war efforts up to this point?

**FRANSEN:** I think at that point and it became very graphically to me that as we were in combat, from my perspective, it appeared to me that we were a group of civilians in military clothes that had a job to do. And the rational was let's get the job done and go home. Our enemy was a professional soldier. He was skilled. He was trained. He was disciplined and don't ever sell the German people short. There we were, fine taught fighting soldiers.

**NELSON:** Do you remember your first combat mission and your first combat zone?

**FRANSEN:** Well, things happened so fast. We were flying every day. I was, to be honest with you, I can't recall the very first time. At the beginning, when I rode co-pilot, I think perhaps what I remember most was that getting into these fields and landing on

these roads that perhaps was the biggest adjustment that I had to make in my life.

**NELSON:** Did you get involved with any type of casualties, how they occurred and how they were treated in your flying exercises?

**FRANSEN:** As far as the casualties, my contact with casualties were getting us down in and one of the most distasteful thing that was bringing back bodies that had been killed at the field. The wounded that we picked up in the fields were what you would call not critical. As far as one of the toughest assignments I had — not in terms of gun flack or enemy and things like this — air "evac" we took turns. I had a flight nurse assigned to my crew. We went to the front lines and landed in the field or something. Those soldiers who were beyond the ability of the field hospital to treat we would fly them back to a base hospital where they would try to save their lives. How the flight nurse could take it in the back of that plane ...It was all I could do to climb into that back door and walk to the cockpit to see what ...

**NELSON:** Were these infantry people that you were ....

**FRANSEN:** I really don't know. They could have been infantry people. They could have been tank people. They could have been artillery people. They were ground forces. That is all I can tell you.

**NELSON:** Did your mental attitude change as combat continued.

**FRANSEN:** No, I found that I had a thing going for me that I thought was very fortunate. Number one, I thoroughly enjoyed flying. Number two, I thoroughly enjoyed fly-

ing an aircraft, so consequently I did something that I was capable of doing, enjoyed doing and felt that this was the best place for me. I did not have a mental attitude nor the disposition to be a ground soldier. I lacked the physical toughness and I think I was able to use my mental faculties, which far outweighed my physical faculties.

**NELSON:** Did you write many letters home?

**FRANSEN:** Yes. I wrote quite a few letters home. Mostly the letters I wrote were to my parents. I was a young fellow — by this time, had just turned twenty and I had no family obligations other than my parents. Let me give you an interesting sidetrack here.

**NELSON:** Okay, fine. Go ahead.

**FRANSEN:** I think it has some meaning when you talk about the mental attitude. I was not aware of this. There was a tremendous strain on my mother. That is because their parents and my cousin in Norway were the key honchos in the Norwegian underground. I was unaware of that. During the time I was flying those combat missions in Europe, she was very concerned that I would get shot down and they would associate me with the family that I was related to who were in the chief underground movers of Norway. My cousin — they had captured him and his wife and they raped and killed his wife. He escaped. The last I heard of him was that he was in some type home there. That's the last and I lost contact.

**NELSON:** Did you receive many letters and packages from anyone?

**FRANSEN:** My mother was very good about sending "care" packages. It was kind of an inside joke. She always included a can

of Spam. God knows, the military had plenty of Spam. But she always used to get some sweets in there such as cookies and stuff like this so when the package came, the members of my squadron — they knew what was in this box. So when I got back from a mission— got back to my bunk there they were with the box on my bunk and they're all sitting around waiting for me to open it.

**NELSON:** Did most of the other men write and receive letters?

**FRANSEN:** I can't honestly answer that question because I never got into there personal family life. The uniqueness about this squadron was that we cared for each other, we looked after each other. We'd let it go at that. We didn't dwell on histories of back in the states or this type of thing. We tried to keep things in perspective and keep things to a minimum.

**NELSON:** Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many of your combat companions?

**FRANSEN:** Very definitely. I feel the squadron members that I was with, for me, having all my relatives in the Scandinavian countries \_\_\_?\_\_\_ in the United States, they are my relations in the United States. I look upon them as kinfolk. We get together every year and there's just something about it that we think a like even though most of us were not married. Even the wives have a lot in common. So it must have been the type of people we were that had a tendency to select the type of wives that we married. Consequently when we would get together for reunions we would have to look and say who the heck reunion is this, is it the wives or is it us guys. But that was a very, very close kinship and it's carried on to this day.

**FRANSEN:** Yeah. In September I received a communication — I had three choices: I could ask for immediate separation, or I could ask for thirty days or I could take duration plus six months. I opted for immediate separation because I had all the combat points and I was at the top of the list because I wanted to catch the fall semester back in school.

**NELSON:** Tell us about your military rank, your decorations, especially your campaign decorations.

**FRANSEN:** Well, you know that's something that kind of goes with the territory. It's like you're in the right place at the right time and they give you something. I never put much stock in that. For your information, you know like, I had three campaign battles to my credit so you get three stars and your ribbons and so forth; then you got your Unit Citation; then you have your medals, too. It kind of goes with the territory. It's something that — I don't see how one person can be singled out given this and that. We worked as a squadron and it was a unique outfit. When we were in the airplane, we didn't wear any rank and we didn't want to be identified. To me, my radio operator was just as important as my copilot was and rank wasn't a factor. We were a bunch of fellows that loved to fly to get the job done. I can recall an incident that was rather interesting. We were on the base there and a Brigadier General came on the base. This kind of tells you the uniqueness and how the squadron worked. He came on the base to inspect the base and we were told by our Commanding Officer that he never got one single salute. The CO was reprimanded. Incidentally my CO was a Captain and he was only twenty-three years of age so it tells you we were a bunch of kids. Well, the CO had to fulfill his duty. He calls us together and he chewed us

out just like the General had chewed him out and after it was all said and done, he got a big grin on his face and he says, "Okay, guys, It's back to business as usual." He says, "We don't need a "buck" General to come in here and play "tin-soldier" when we got a job to do." I'll never forget that experience.

**NELSON:** How many missions were you in?

**FRANSEN:** I suppose if you — It's hard. If I were to count them up or pin point them, I don't know, probably eighty. I don't know. We never kept track. We got in the airplane and we flew and all I know is I didn't have enough to go home and the rotation was one hundred missions, eight hundred hours of combat and generally two years of service in combat.

**NELSON:** Were there things you would do differently if you could do them again?

**FRANSEN:** As far as serving in the United States Armed Forces?

**NELSON:** Yes.

**FRANSEN:** No, I wouldn't change a thing. I was a lucky guy. I was — I did what I had the ability to do. I enjoyed flying the aircraft and I wouldn't change a thing.

**NELSON:** What was the most difficult thing you had to do during your period of military service?

**FRANSEN:** Oh, probably the most difficult thing was to remind yourself of the discipline that you, as an individual, had to pursue. Because you had — I had too much training as I went through and I didn't want to do some silly thing to lose the chance of becoming a pilot. I didn't want to get washed out for

some insignificant thing. Also, in flying missions, once we climbed in the aircraft, it was dead serious, absolutely dead serious: no monkey business, no kidding, or nothing. On the way back why then we could kind of let down and we would do some silly things like we'd go down and "buzz" a boat on the water, or something like this. I think that was the most difficult maintaining a self-discipline yourself.

**NELSON:** Is there any one thing that stands out as your most successful achievement in the military service? Coming back alive probably.

**FRANSEN:** Well, I think perhaps, If I look at the military, there were two things that perhaps helped me to this day. One think I learned I had the ability to do things that I didn't realize I had because it didn't show up in high school and it didn't show up in college. Passing courses and getting good grades doesn't tell you that. So I learned from the military that I did have ability and I could do it. And the second thing I think perhaps was that it gave you a little bit different perspective on life. That everything wasn't a bowl of cherries but the real world out there. Those two things more than anything I learned from being in the military.

**NELSON:** How did you learn about VE Day? What was your reaction to it?

**FRANSEN:** Victory in Europe Day, we knew it was coming and we had a pool. Each guy had a number. Whatever day of the month and that pool went back to January when we knew it was coming. We didn't know when. Well, I got #7. I got all the money. But our reaction was that our job was done and nobody's going to take any pot shots at us. But there wasn't any emotional thing or any — Oh sure, we had a few

cocktails and we celebrated a little bit. But nothing like you might see celebrations in the United States or anything else. The media hype — we didn't have that.

**NELSON:** How did you hear about VJ Day and what was your reaction to it?

**FRANSEN:** I was in South America on VJ Day and when that was all signed sealed and delivered, my immediate thought was to get back to civilian life.

**NELSON:** What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was dropped on the Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

**FRANSEN:** I guess when you're in a military conflict and you're part of it you have to look at it and you have to separate personnel from the realities of war. For example, when you salute one of your superiors, you're not saluting the man you're saluting the uniform. When you're in combat you are — the enemy is a soldier and he's in a uniform. The enemy is not a person and consequently I saw many civilian casualties because of the war. This was just something that's in the same venue except it was more devastating and more powerful. But, and if you try to put it in some type of perspective, I'm sure we inflicted as much damage when we had one or two thousand bombers letting all those bombs go all at once as opposed to one bomb doing the same thing. So you kind of kept in perspective because that's war. So I'm looking at from a participant in a war and not looking at it as a personal thing. You cannot, when you're in the battle, what it says you have an enemy and that enemy is a "no name" person. He's in a uniform as the enemy and you don't know what his background is, you don't know anything else. Neither did they know my background. If I had a, which I didn't but if I would have had



a wife and three or four kids at home, it wouldn't have made any difference. That doesn't enter into it.

**NELSON:** Has your opinion changed over the last 50 years?

**FRANSEN:** I think that they say when you can't resolve a political settlement or agreement then the last step is war. I think perhaps that it becomes an objective thing. How do we resolve something? Well, if it gets to the point where all types of political and other avenues fail, and there's a carnage that continues, then you're down to the last resort, and that's war and I'm not so sure how you can change that. The other thing you have to remember that cultures are different in this world. When I was in the Middle East and I remember getting into Egypt, you have to stand back and look at the culture. Those people don't think like we do. I can recall some of my colleagues from schools who were pastors and you can't impose a certain type of religion on someone else who has a different type. If it meets their needs, that's their culture. They may say our culture is out of whack like we say theirs is out of whack so it's a stand off.

**NELSON:** When were you officially discharged from service?

**FRANSEN:** I was separated from the service in November of 1945. At that time, I'm not sure if they conned me into it or what, but they told me that, with my pilot rating aircraft, that they had orders to send me to Westerfield, Massachusetts, and I was to fly B54s between here and Europe that they needed my pilot experience. I told them, "No way." I said, "I had the points and I wanted out." So they compromised me. I got so that the Commanding Officer at the Separation Center in Fort Sheridan and it was agreed

that I would enlist in the Reserves for five years and they would put me on inactive duty. I said to myself, "What the heck, five years, no big deal. We're not going to be in war in five years. I darn near guessed wrong.

**NELSON:** Did you have a disability rating or pension?

**FRANSEN:** No.

**NELSON:** Do you have any opinion or theories about the nation's status or the military policies?

**FRANSEN:** Today?

**NELSON:** Yes.

**FRANSEN:** Well, it's kind of hard for me to stand from the outside and look in. But I would say that in the military today, I think there's a lot of merit in the all-volunteer service program because you're getting the people who want to go in and not those who don't want to go in. But as far as a good military, I think what you really need is a good reserve system because at heart I think people in the United States are \_\_\_?\_\_\_ thinking first and military thinking second. Sometimes the regular military, they may become too complacent but that's not fair for me to say because I really don't know.

**NELSON:** Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

**FRANSEN:** No.

**NELSON:** You've never gone to a Veterans' Administration or anything.

**FRANSEN:** No.

**NELSON:** Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your military life and over the subsequent years what this has meant to you?

**FRANSEN:** Well, I think the only ones that would support you at the time I was in the military in Europe — It's kind of hard \_\_\_?\_\_\_ support ... My parents were concerned about my welfare just as much as anybody. On the other hand, my parents were not military minded coming from a Scandinavian country, they perhaps were more pacifists than military minded. So consequently I had no criticism about being in the military service nor did I have any, shall we say, praise or anything like that. It was kind of a neutral.

**NELSON:** Okay. That was a great interview you. Is there anything else you would like to add to it?

**FRANSEN:** I think if you're going to use this material that you're putting all these hours in to compile and generate I think it would be a good source of information. Some graduate student at some university could get it into a form of military history, or writing that someone could read some day that kind of gives an insight as to what makes it work. When you look at history and you look at data it's dates, it's events, it's battles but they never tell you what makes it work. They don't tell you about the innovations and the ideas that come from the rank and file and incentives and the craziest things they'll do to get the job done. I can tell you we did some very unorthodox but there things but they were ingenious. They were ideas that worked. By military standards, they were disaster but they worked. This is the type of thing that would make an interesting project for some graduate assistant or graduate student who could put something together that someone could sit down and

read. As they read the thing, they could say, "Hey, there was ingenuity and the idea of the American, an United States citizen, in a military uniform that made the difference. It wasn't the uniform or the military training it was those littlest things that they came up with that was absolutely ingenious. We got a lot of "good idea" guys.

**NELSON:** Well, thank you, Gunnar, that was a great interview.

**NELSON:** You never got involved with any enemy prisoners or anything of that nature

**FRANSEN:** I was never involved but in \_\_\_?\_\_\_, New Mexico we brought some of the prisoners to the United States and that training sight, they had the German prisoners that were working in the mess halls and doing some work. But in the front lines I never was in contact with any German prisoners. Some of the Squadron members of mine were in contact but I did not have that connection.

**NELSON:** You were never in contact with civilian concentration camps that they existed and so on.

**FRANSEN:** No, I was not. I was in contact with the partisans and the leadership of Marshall Tito because we were supplying those people and how they \_\_\_?\_\_\_. I had no contact with captured or people of that nature. I ran into — some of the prisoners that the partisans had freed, or managed to free, we got in and got and got those out.

**NELSON:** I see. What is the highlight occurrence in your combat experience or any other experiences in you can remember?

**FRANSEN:** It's hard to say that there's a highlight in the very nasty, dirty business of conflicts, such as were, perhaps if you can put it in proper perspective and I look back on it. I would say getting women and children out, getting some of the men back to behind the lines, humanitarian aspect of it. Yes, we do have kinds military things that make for interesting reading. I could tell you more stories about some of the flights and situations we had a lot of graphic things and a lot of "hype" to it. We did this everyday and so consequently it became a part of our job.

**NELSON:** Tell us what you and other men did to celebrate America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

**FRANSEN:** Okay. It was business as usual. I can recall, Christmas Eve in 1944, I wasn't assigned a mission that day and consequently some of my colleagues of the Catholic faith in the squadron wanted to go to Christmas Eve services in Rome. So being a faithful Protestant I said, "Hey, I'll fly you up." So I flew them up and they were able to attend the Christmas mass. But I had to stay with the plane. It was a good experience for me being a Protestant but it meant more to them. Someone had to stay with the plane. I stayed with the plane

**NELSON:** When and how did you return to the United States after the end of the war?

**FRANSEN:** At the end of the war in Europe, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May we left for reassignment as a squadron to South America for the main project. This squadron was to fly personnel from Europe to United States for possibly two reasons: One, for reassignment to the Pacific War, and two, for those who had earned their combat tenure. Our squadron was placed in Trinidad. I was assigned to fly out of Berlin(?), Brazil, to Georgetown, British Guyana. We flew every day and planes would fly via the Mediterranean, North Africa, Ascension Island, then into Brazil up to British Guyana into Trinidad and on into the United States. Our squadron headquarters was then in Trinidad but I was stationed in Berlin, Brazil, as Pilot's Assistant Operations Officer. Upon conclusion of the war in the Pacific which was in September — I can't recall ...

**NELSON:** August 6<sup>th</sup>.