

Frank R. Wilson

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Today is March 19, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer at Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, interviewing Mr. Frank R. Wilson who served in a branch of the United States Armed Services during the war. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

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

WILSON: My name is Frank Rodney Wilson. My birth date is October 14, 1923. My father's name was Walter Wilson and my mother's name Bertha Cragler Wilson. I have two sisters both of them are married.

NELSON: Are there any details about you parents or you family that you would like to give?

WILSON: Well, I guess we were pretty ordinary for that period of time. However, my father did build our home in Grand Rapids, Michigan. (Long pause). There's a part of my grandfather's homestead in a museum up in Oconda, Wisconsin, where my father was raised.

NELSON: What was life like for you before the war specifically during 1941?

WILSON: I was senior that year in high school. I was having a great time. Except for the rationing that occurred after December 7th. I was involved in basketball and track ...

NELSON: What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

WILSON: Well, I figured we would get into it, sooner or later. I didn't think we could remain neutral.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7th bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so, where were you and what were you doing at the time? What was your reaction and response to those around you?

WILSON: The football captain and I were playing a game of touch football with a couple—about four other guys. A kid came running out of a house near the park and said the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. We didn't believe him. We said, "You must be joking." He turned around and went back in the house. When we got home we found out he wasn't joking.

NELSON: What was your reaction?

WILSON: Well, I figured we would get into it on the side of England and we had a purpose to stop the Germans and Japanese.

NELSON: Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what had been taking place in Europe or Asia?

WILSON: Yeah. Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo were ruthless dictators.

NELSON: Did you recall reading newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe.

WILSON: Yeah.

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

WILSON: No, I, not really—not until we got into the war. I guess being in high school I didn't pay too much attention to that.

NELSON: What events led to you entering the military service? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

WILSON: I came here to Camp Grant and volunteered a week after I graduated from high school.

NELSON: Was your response to entering military service influenced by family and friends attitudes toward the war, the threat to national security or other considerations?

WILSON: Well, I wanted to get in, hopefully to fly.

NELSON: This next section goes into basic training. When and where were you inducted?

WILSON: Camp Grant.

NELSON: Do you have any special memories of this event?

WILSON: I just came here and took the physical and mental tests and then went home and waited about six months for them to call me to active duty and went to classification (?) in Nashville.

NELSON: How old were you?

WILSON: When the war started I was eighteen and when I joined I was eighteen but I went on active duty when I was nineteen.

NELSON: What happened after you were inducted?

WILSON: At Nashville they decided whether we were going to go to pilot school, navigation school or bombardier's school.

NELSON: Where were you sent?

WILSON: Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama, for pre-flight.

NELSON: Where did you take your basic military training?

WILSON: In the southeast, three or four different flight schools.

NELSON: And what were you trained to do?

WILSON: Be a pilot.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

WILSON: Good.

NELSON: Did anything special happen there?

NELSON: Well, when I was at Maxwell Field we had an inspection one Saturday. It was Hap Arnold. He came walking down our rank and stopped tight in front of me and asked my name and when I gave it to him he said, "Where was that hat issued to you?" I said, "In Nashville, sir." Then he went down the rank.

NELSON: Tell us about all the military camps you attended. Tell us about...

WILSON: Well, wait a minute now. I got another one when I was primary. I was up solo and on my way back to the home field, I looked at the windsock and planned my pattern according to the windsock and when I was on the approach leg I looked up and airplanes were coming at me. The wind had changed on them and they hadn't changed their pattern on the ground. I got out of the way as quickly as possible and there were three or four military check pilots. All of our instructors were civilians but the check pilots were military and one of them said, "You're an accident going somewhere to happen." I just passed that off and I'm still here so must not have been too bad except if I had seen him later after I got back from overseas I would have said, "Yeah, you sure were right." I had thirty-three accidents. They all happened in Germans."

NELSON: Tell us what other training camps you attended.

WILSON: The primary was at Carlstrom Field, Arcadia, Florida, BT-13 training was at Cochran Field, in Macon, Georgia, twin engine advance was at Turner Field, Albany, Georgia.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

WILSON: Had passes but I didn't have enough money to go into town and spend it so I waited until I had my wings and had a furlough home.

NELSON: What do you recall of this period about the places you were stationed, the friends you made and your association with civilians?

WILSON: Oh, They were all good. They knew what we were in training for.

NELSON: What was your military unit?

WILSON: 92nd Bomb Group, 407th Bomb Squadron and ___?__.

NELSON: What were your assigned duties?

WILSON: Co-pilot on a B17. (Long pause.)

NELSON: And this was participation in the conflict? Where did you go after continuing military training?

WILSON: Went to Kearney, Nebraska and picked up a brand new B-17 and our crew ferried it over to England.

NELSON: When you were sent overseas how did you get there?

WILSON: I just explained that.

NELSON: What were you assigned to do after arriving?

WILSON: Get ready for combat, our crew...

NELSON: What did you think of the nation's war effort up to this time?

WILSON: Our war effort?

NELSON: Yes.

WILSON: Well, I thought it was taking an awful long time to get everything thing in gear and going.

NELSON: If you did not immediately enter the combat zone, where did you go before entering combat?

WILSON: Entered immediately after being overseas.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience in entering your first combat zone or missions-.

WILSON: The first mission was to Merseburg (Laughter.) It was very enlightening to say the least. Flack was so thick it looked like you could get out and walk on it. The thing of it is we went back twice more. About half way through and then on my last mission. Back to Merseburg.

NELSON: Can you list for us in order of occurrence all subsequent combat action in which you are involved.

WILSON: D-day was my 7th mission. Then some weeks later went to Berlin. Oh, yeah. There was one mission to central France shortly after the invasion. Germans—it was an Ozark type of area, mountain, foot hill type mountains. And we weren't suppose to know about the munitions dump but they weren't suppose to know that we knew about it, but when we got there, they were waiting and the flack was really heavy. We went in under 14,000 feet. I don't think we went on oxygen. The flight surgeon was required to fly a mission every actual combat mission once in awhile. This was supposed to be a milk run. He was on this

mission. I saw him later in debriefing and he couldn't—He took both hands to hold these glasses of scotch—shot of scotch. (Laughter)

NELSON: Are there any others you would like to mention?

WILSON: Yeah. They are all kind of blurred together except for the Merseburg missions, Berlin and D-Day.

NELSON: Can you tell us...

WILSON: We wound up flying for twelve hours on this mission. We took off before dawn, flew to what we thought was our radio beacon. It was not light enough to see so we were with the wrong formation. We cruised around looking for our group and we checked out three or four. Then off in the distance we saw a formation that was missing a plain in our position that we were assigned to. So we went rushing up there and found out it was not our group. But we asked them if they minded if we tagged along. They said, "No, come right along." Then we were approaching cruise altitude near 20,000 feet and the tuning board superchargers lost the governors, lost the governors and the engines revved way up. We tried to check them out and feed them back in but every time we hit a certain point, the turbos would go out of control and so we flew up the rest of that mission on virtually two engines. The pilot asked me, "Do you think we ought to feather it?" I said, "No, we'll be stone cold by the time we get back below 10,000 feet. We won't be able to restart them." So we just left them running. We flew our mission on the two outboard engines. Then on the way back after we got out of dangerous German airspace started heading down. They always picked up speed and we couldn't stay with them with our 2 – 4 engines. So we must have been near the front of the column of bombers coming back. We slipped under each formation as it caught up to us. We noticed that the first group that did that all their guns were trained on us because there were German B-

17s that would go up there who pulled that kind of a stunt and shoot a bunch of them down. So we made sure all of our guns were turned away from the formation. We slipped from one formation after another caught up to them. Then we were over England and we were by ourselves and we passed over B-26 field and asked for a heading to our field. They gave it to us and we went on and made our landing. The next morning we were out there for another mission and the sergeant in charge of the troops said, "You guys landed on fumes." There wasn't more than about five gallons for each engine. If we had to go around, something had gone wrong and we had to go around we wouldn't have made it. We would have ended up in some English farmer's field.

NELSON: Please tell us in full detail, if possible, about the approximate number of and types of casualties, how they occurred and how they were treated.

WILSON: Well, I was extremely lucky. I've got to say I was extremely lucky. The day that we flew a mission we did not suffer any losses. Airplanes, there were a few that got wounded with flack. Our ball-turret gunner received a scratch that took about 6 stitches, a piece of shrapnel came into the ball-turret, whizzed around and bouncing off everything and cutting over the eye on one bounce. We saw 3 enemy aircraft and 2 of them were enemies chasing a lone 17 that had aborted and was headed back for England. As far as I could watch him, he was still in the air. Then on my last mission an ME-162 rocket plane attacked our formation. It put a hole with a cannon shell big enough in the lead ship's wing, left wing for a man to crawl through and in the process it cut through a control cable. And we were on the bomb run. We had past the IP, bomb bay doors were open and he felt the plane slipping out of control. He hit the salvo switch and all the other bombardiers were watching and following the lead plane and when they saw his bombs hit and so we didn't come any where close to the target, but he got that plane back to England. He

couldn't lead the group. He had to fall out and go back on his own but he got that plane back.

NELSON: Were their casualties? How were they treated?

WILSON: To tell you the truth, I didn't see any.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

WILSON: Well, I was just getting gladder and gladder the closer I got to my last mission to get it over with.

NELSON: What did you think of the war so far?

WILSON: Well, like I say, D-Day was our 7th mission and so we were flying missions while the guys were approaching Paris, broke out of Saint Lo. Oh, that was one of my missions, Saint Lo, for the Cherbourg Peninsula break out.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

WILSON: Oh, yeah.

NELSON: Did you receive many letters or packages if so, how often?

WILSON: My wife was always writing me and I was always answering.

NELSON: Did you receive packets?

WILSON: Yeah.

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

WILSON: Yeah.

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

WILSON: I can't remember the names of any of the other guys other than my crew even though I was over there almost a half a year.

NELSON: Have you remained in contact with any of your World War II companions?

WILSON: Let me see. October 1992 I went out to Tucson for the 50th Anniversary of the formation of the 92nd bomb group.

NELSON: Did you ever have to help a wounded person in combat?

WILSON: (No answer).

NELSON: What was your highlight occurrence of your combat experience or any other experiences you remember?

WILSON: The 3 Merseburg missions, D-Day, Berlin. I think one mission was to Munich and the Saint Lo mission. That one at 14,000 feet into central France ...

NELSON: Tell us (Interruption).

WILSON: Other than that they all seemed to run together.

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

WILSON: We were over there for July 4th.but there wasn't any big thing made of it and my last mission was in August and I was back by the middle of September so I wasn't over there for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

NELSON: When and how did you return to the United at end of the war?

WILSON: On a C54, Douglas C54 transport.

NELSON: What happened when you arrived in the United States?

WILSON: We had two weeks leave. My wife and I went to Miami, Miami Beach, we spent a couple of weeks there.

NELSON: Please tell us about your military rank and decorations especially your campaign decorations.

WILSON: (Long pause). I've got my ribbons. My ribbon bar has the DFC, the air medal with three oak leaf clusters and ETO ribbon with three bronze battle stars. The middle one is for D-Day. One of these is for air offensive Europe and I don't know what the other one. It was so similar to the air offensive Europe that I keep getting them mixed up but that middle one is for D-Day.

NELSON: How many missions were you in?

WILSON: Thirty-three.

NELSON: This pertains to your return to civilian life. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

WILSON: You mean after the war?

NELSON: Yes, after getting back to civilian life.

WILSON: Oh, didn't have any trouble at all.

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

WILSON: Yes. I would have stayed in another year and then when I knew more about the GI Bill I could have gone through college with the rank of whatever __?__. If I had been in a year longer, I probably would have been a captain. I would hope so. But I could have gone through the GI Bill in college with the rank of 1st Lieutenant maybe captain on that pay instead of \$95 a month.

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

WILSON: Getting my wings.

NELSON: Is there any one thing that stands out as you most successful achievement in your military service?

WILSON: Well, I did my job and I survived. Wait a minute. There was one little thing when I was getting my wings. About the time I graduated from cadets, they had decided there were too many 2nd Lieutenants and they began issuing—they created a position called Flight Officer. There was a little blue enameled bar with a gold bar running—it was similar to a Warrant Officer except that it was blue and gold. We were supposed to go in there and talk to an officer and tell him why we thought we ought to be a 2nd Lieutenant rather than a Flight Officer. I went in there and the guy said, “Well, what's your story?” I said, “is the uniform the same?” He said, “Yeah.” Is the pay the same? He said, “Yeah.” Do I rank a salute from the enlisted men?” He said, “Yeah.” “Are those wings the same?” He said, “Yeah, it doesn't make any difference.” and when I looked at the list, I was “2nd Lieutenant.”

NELSON: How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to it?

WILSON: Oh, let's see. VE Day was in May. I was probably in __?__, Texas. Glad we had defeated them.

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

WILSON: Let's see. That was August. (Long pause). I think I was maybe in __?__ New Mexico. Well, we were all glad it was all over.

NELSON: What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used

against Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

WILSON: Well, we were told it would save literally thousands and thousands of our guys and I read later that they calculated something in the neighborhood of two and a half million casualties with one and a half to two million being Japanese and the rest of them allies. As many as possibly four million with three million Japanese casualties and one million allied casualties. So that makes the number of casualties that actually occurred from the bomb and brought the war to an end. I was all in favor of that.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed say in the last fifty years?

WILSON: No.

NELSON: When and where were you officially discharged from the service?

WILSON: Fort Sheridan. ___?___. Just on my birthday. It was the middle of October 1945.

NELSON: Do you have any feeling about the nations military status or policies?

WILSON: Well, regardless of the ___?__ bombs (?) and its tirade against Grenada, I was in favor of Grenada and the ___?___. I'm in favor of Desert Storm.

NELSON: What is your opinion of the Veterans' Administration and did you have any contact with it?

WILSON: Veterans' Administration?

NELSON: Yes.

WILSON: I don't have any contact with them.

NELSON: You have never been in the hospital, Veterans' Administration Hospital?

WILSON: No. The only thing is the GI Bill. I guess that comes under the Veterans' Administration.

NELSON: I think so. Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your military life?

WILSON: (Some indistinct discussion) I had moral support all the way. Oh, sure. They were all for it ___?__.

NELSON: In your subsequent years, what has this support meant to you?

WILSON: It kept our family close ___?__.

NELSON: Well, Frank, is there anything else you would like to add to it?

WILSON: I knew by the time I was seven years old, that I wanted to fly. About that time I was reading The ___?__ and we went out to Chicago ___?__ now called Midway. I remember and occasion or one Sunday we were out there watching the planes come in and they were ___?___ and then all of a sudden this streamlined of an airplane—it was probably a DC2, but I knew that was the wave of the future. No more ___?___. No more ___?__ putting the ___?__ together flaps turned powerful enough to keep the plane in the air. To keep the plane up and you know there was never any doubt I was gonna try to do and I volunteered for service. That was the beginning (Long pause). I have no regrets of my military service. It was—it made many things that came afterwards possible and I was able to go to college on the GI Bill and became a teacher, science teacher, for nearly 35 years. I think that all came about because of my military experience.

NELSON: Well, thank you. That was a good interview.