

Charles W. Staley

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My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer at Midway Village & Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Charles Nelson in Roscoe, Illinois, to interviewing Mr. C. W. Staley who served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war. We are continuing this interview with Mr. Staley on June 6, 1994, which is the 50th Anniversary of D-Day.

NELSON: Would you please give your name and—please give us your full name and place and date of birth.

STALEY: My full name is Charles W. Staley, usually known as Chuck, I was born in Brooklyn, Wisconsin, on the 8th of October 1920.

NELSON: We would also like to have the names of each one of your parents.

STALEY: My father was Gilbert C. Staley. My mother's maiden name was Edith M. Lewis. They came from Albany, an area of Green County, Wisconsin.

NELSON: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

STALEY: I have 3 sisters.

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

STALEY: My mother was a registered nurse in Wisconsin and she was an Army contact nurse at Camp Grant in Rockford during the flu epidemic during World War I. My father was a farmer.

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

STALEY: Well, during 1941, I was already in

the service, in the Army Air Corp. I enlisted on the 4th of February of that year.

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

STALEY: I more or less had a strong hunch that it was coming. That was one reason for enlistment. The other reason was to get up a rating of #3 on the priority list for aviation cadet training.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7th 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese?

STALEY: I was a corporal down at [Keesler] Air Force base in Mississippi called [Keesler] Field then. My roommate and I, he was Staff Sergeant, had been to the midnight show in Biloxi the night before. We woke up late, turned the radio on and we heard the news and I looked at him (Dick Reiner from Kansas) and said, "Dick, there goes our Christmas furloughs all to hell."

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

STALEY: I had more or less been interested in the news on it and so forth and I knew it was going to be a repeat of World War I. Actually I was a little surprised that the Japanese were involved so early.

NELSON: But you had read newspaper accounts of the situation? Did you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

STALEY: Newsreels that sort of thing and reading, of course - magazines and newspapers.

NELSON: So you were a volunteer in the Air Force?

STALEY: Correct.

NELSON: When and where were you inducted?

STALEY: I enlisted at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the 4th of February 1941.

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

STALEY: I remember that it was a grade school friend of mine, named Jim [Fitbinney] who had enlisted for the Coast Artillery. We went down to Sheridan first. Then we were put on a troop train for St. Louis. He was headed for the Philippines and that was the last I saw of him when we parted company in St. Louis. He was on the death march and didn't make it.

NELSON: How old were you when you became involved?

STALEY: I enlisted when I was just past 20.

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

STALEY: First to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. We were there in tents in February of '41. Remember waking up one morning with icicles in my hair. I had taken a late shampoo the night before. Then we went over to Scott, another recruit training, Scott Field, Illinois, near Belleville. From there I went to Fort Logan. I was drafted I guess to go to an administrative clerical school. I wanted to go to aircraft mechanics school. We arrived there in April of '41 and we had to complete a 16-week course in 14 weeks because someone had sent us 2 weeks late. So then we went down to Keesler, I believe there were about 50 of us from Scott that went out to Logan (?). We went down to Keesler and we helped pioneer Keesler. Actually there were about 3000.

NELSON: Keesler is in what state?

STALEY: That's in Biloxi, Mississippi. There were about 3000 people there when we arrived in August of '41. When I left the cadet training in July of '42 there were over 40,000.

NELSON: Okay. Did you have any leaves or

passes? If so, how did you use them?

STALEY: I had a delay en route between Fort Logan and Keesler down at Biloxi. I bought a Model A Ford out in Englewood, Colorado, drove that along with 5 others. It was a little crowded but that was the only way we could get a delay en route. Then we spent, I believe 15 days here in the Midwest and then headed on down to Keesler.

NELSON: Okay. That was in the Air Force?

STALEY: Army Air Corp, yeah.

NELSON: Your assigned duties were to fly?

STALEY: Not at that time.

NELSON: Not at that point. Okay. Where did you go after completing basic military training?

STALEY: Oh, I believe I already covered that, Fort Logan and so forth.

NELSON: Okay. Now if you were not sent overseas immediately following basic training, when did you finally leave the United States?

STALEY: I was in cadet training until March of '43 down in Mission, Texas. It was advance flight training in AT6s. Then I went up to Westover and received 10 hours in P47s, which was quite an experience, going from 650 horse power to 2000 with no in between. Then I was sent up to Grenier where the 359th Fighter Group was stationed at the time. From Grenier we went down to Long Island with 2 squadrons of us being at Republic Field and the other one, the 370th down at Mitchell at Hempstead.

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

STALEY: Let's see. I'd better cover ... We left from Long Island and staged up at Westover. From Westover we went down to Kilmer. Then we left the Port of New York on my birthday, 8th of October 1943. We arrived over in Scotland about 11 days later as I recall.

NELSON: Okay. When and where were you sent overseas and how did you get there?

STALEY: Well, we went by banana boat actually. It rocked and rolled and it was pretty rough in October. In Scotland, near Glasgow, we boarded a train and went down to ___?___, England. Then by truck to East ___?___ s about 6 miles from ___?___.

NELSON: Then were you assigned to a plane after you got to ...

STALEY: We didn't have our aircraft immediately. We arrived there in late middle of October. I don't think we got our aircraft until late November. Seems like. Then we went operational the 13th of [December?]

NELSON: What did you do to spend your time when you first got over there?

STALEY: Well, we familiarized ourselves with the base. We had aircraft recognition courses. One of these, I remember, was taught by a man from Madison, Wisconsin, where he has retired from Middleton, now Jorgenson. He actually wrote a book "Jorgi's War". He had this aircraft recognition course and taught that. Then we had our own ground school and so forth, staying current on aircraft recognition. Little on the geography, of course. I did a lot of study of a big map of Europe that we had in our flight room trying to memorize all the major rivers and all that sort of thing which came in handy later.

NELSON: That's true. What did you think of the nation's war efforts up to this point?

STALEY: Well, one thing that a lot of us weren't too impressed with was John L. Lewis calling a coal miners' strike in the summer of '43 because we figured that would hinder the war effort.

NELSON: If you did not immediately enter a combat zone, where did you go prior to combat?

STALEY: We were actually in a combat zone as soon as we arrived in England.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience of entering your first combat zone or your first mission.

STALEY: Well, the 1st mission was our flight sweep over France. The probably most interesting part for me was I was flying down sun and after while the sun didn't bother me. I was having trouble seeing other aircraft. Suddenly it dawned on me, oxygen. My oxygen hose came disconnected at 2700 feet. So I turned the oxygen on and got 100% sun blossomed out. It was like someone had turned up a rheostat.

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

STALEY: Ah, well.

NELSON: (Interrupted).

STALEY: The 13th of December on a more or less routine escort we were involved in the January 11th event where the American losses, I believe were in 91 heavies, B24s and B17s. I think we lost 3 or 4 out of the 370 Squadron. The weather was bad. The fighters couldn't make ground contact properly. The bombers were late and off course. It was just a miserable bunch of soup up there. Somewhere over the Netherlands, we were in the way of some—I don't remember whether it was 190s or 109s and they avoided us apparently or lost us when they went into some clouds. We were trying to get after them. I had a belly tank that hung up. My crew chief never was able to figure out later how I tore the ___?___ side of the fuselage. But I was a little desperate and shackle was hung apparently and I wanted to get rid of that tank because it was pretty flammable if it was hit in combat. When I couldn't get rid of it, they sent me home. That was the first time I saw P51s. I was following bombers that were headed back for England aborting and going to join up with them more or less. I looked back and I saw all these single engine in line—fighters coming out of the overcast. My aching back, here I am with this tank all alone and a whole group of Germans was after me. Then I saw the scoops to identify them. Before I made identification I had the

___?___ wrapped up into the firewall. I was on just routine escort. Somehow or other I, the flight I was in never seemed to get too involved for some reason or other. We just weren't in the right place at the right time.

NELSON: Your whole group?

STALEY: Some of the rest of the group got into it but somehow or other we weren't at the place the Germans came in.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

STALEY: Not appreciable. We had a job to do and we just kept on doing the job.

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

STALEY: It was getting a little rough here and there. We lost quite a few. In fact when we came back to the States there were 26 as I recall in the squadron, 26 pilots, including the ___?___ officer and the squadron commander. I counted 13 of us were still on the right side of the drink, the drink being the North Sea and the Channel.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

STALEY: Oh, yes.

NELSON: Did you receive letters and packages?

STALEY: Not too many packages as I told them not to send any. They got beat up in the mail too much. I got my wife to send me some wax. Wanted to wax my P-47, this was quite a project. She did find Johnson's wax or simonize, can't remember which now.

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

STALEY: Correct.

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

STALEY: We were all see; about 90 or 95% of the outfit was from the class of Aviation Cadets and Gulf Coast training command.

NELSON: So you knew them fairly well then.

STALEY: That was the reason we knew each other fairly well before we were ever in combat.

NELSON: And that's important to have that relationship when you depend on each other, right?

STALEY: Right.

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

STALEY: Correct. We have a reunion association. Started out with 369th Fighter Squadron and then it's now extended to the other 2 squadrons. Let's see—368th and 370th squadrons. We were the middle squadron. Through notices and so forth I let the others know I've been the perennial secretary association since 1980 so I...

NELSON: (Interrupts). Got stuck with the job?

STALEY: I got stuck with it. I volunteered to take the minutes because the original secretary wasn't there. They elected me secretary. Now I can't get out of it. But anyway we had—I think we have as many from each of the other squadrons as we gave from the 369th.now. We also invited our units that we had over there to join us. A lot of them have.

NELSON: What was your highlight occurrence in your combat experience and any other experience you remember?

STALEY: Highlight? I guess—well, one in particular was in March of 1944. We were on an escort mission in the eastern Netherlands. I probably got lined up with the south of the Zui-derZee as many people call it. There were some B-17s missing and all that sort of thing. We received a call from a wing controller who apparently had radar at the time. Sometimes we were in doubt later whether that was a bogus call or

not because that could have happened. Well, anyway before the 30 plus German aircraft over Zwolle in the Netherlands. They left a flight of 4 of us on the crippled B-17s. Somehow or other the rest of the group and The Germans must have passed between our position in Zwolle because we wound up with a 30 plus and the 4 of us. I was on C-channel, which is right around our intercom—port channel VHF. So I didn't hear our call to break or anything. The next I know I was in Squadron ___?___ and he ___?___ break to the left. Number 3 man came across and cut me out of the flight, so I had to pull in and about that time a German aircraft was on their tail so I started after him, to get him off their tail. John Oliphant of Colorado Springs now had water. I, incidentally, had the only aircraft in the squadron that didn't have water. It had been modified. Anyhow old Johnny was going straight up in black smoke pouring out in the full bore on the P-47 and he could not climb him. I stuck on the tail of this troop. I think this is the one I probably got credit for. But anyway, I gave some header bursts and then I got close enough in so I got some strikes. I headed him off, in other words, from the 2 ahead of me.

NELSON: He didn't bail out or anything?

STALEY: Not to my knowledge because we got down to a lower altitude and they told us not to try to turn with him at low altitude, at that time with a P-47. So, anyway, I hadn't cleared my tail and I didn't know how many behind me at that time. It happened to be a friendly cumulus cloud there so I just tied in to it and made about a 45° turn in case somebody was too close on behind me. And all of them turned me in as MIA (missing in action) when they got back to England because he said the last he saw of anything, he was prone to a little exaggeration, he said the last we saw of them the whole Luftwaffe was on my tail. Anyway ___?___ and so forth and I got a little bum steer from Homer. I had to let down 2 ___?___ and Homer told me it sounded like I passed over the station. So I proceeded to make a 180 and started a let down and had only about a 300-foot ceiling. I came out and discovered there was a barrage balloon cable floating in the overcast about ¼ of a mile off my left wing and I couldn't find anything familiar. Up where we

were stationed East ___?___ why Airdromes were all over the place. I found and located my airdrome went in and landed and discovered there was a ___?___ north of London. A funny thing happened there. There was a Spitty Spitfire came in and had a Norwegian refugee pilot. He was about 6' 2" and I imagine he weighed about 200. At that time I weighed about 140 and about 5' 5". I got out of that big P47 and the big Norwegian pilot got out of the Spitty and the flight control officer was shaking his head wondering what was going on I think. Anyway I got back from the fray.

NELSON: Well, you lived to tell about it. Tell us what you and the others men did to celebrate American traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

STALEY: Christmas of 1943, I was over there. I can't recall whether we flew a mission that day. We probably didn't but I don't recall any special event or anything.

NELSON: Did you get any special treats as far as food?

STALEY: Not that I recall in that year. I guess in '44 they did. Not that I recall in 1943.

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

STALEY: I came back before the end of the war. I left over there I think in late August. I arrived in New York the 5th of September of '44. I took leave. I think when I was in the boat coming back to the States.

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

STALEY: I was sent to Fort Sheridan and delayed en route to report down to Miami Beach for redistribution as a fighter instructor for replacement training. So I was on leave for—I can't remember whether it was 15 days or what it was. No, think it was 30 days that time because I had to report in to Miami Beach on the 8th of October, my birthday coming up.

NELSON: How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

STALEY: I was just—Do you mean in combat or...

NELSON: The people you associated with while in the service.

STALEY: I spent a long time in service. (Laughter)

NELSON: I would say during the time, you know, in the '40s.

STALEY: Well, as I say, we were all pretty good friends. I had classmates that were all in two squadrons and all that sort of thing.

NELSON: If you had to do things differently, would you do them once again or would you do them differently?

STALEY: I probably would follow the same course. I wanted to be a fighter pilot for as long as I can remember.

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

STALEY: I can't think of anything most difficult.

NELSON: Is there anyone thing that stands out as your most successful achievement in the military service?

STALEY: I trained the first Turkish fighter pilots in P-47s getting them ready for combat. One of them, Osdora(?) wound up as leader of the Turkish aerobatics team in F-84s around about 1950-'51, sometime that year. I saw him again in early 1955 when in Germany on a visit to our NATO Bases over there.

NELSON: Well, in your period of time when you were in service you did a lot of traveling over in Europe? Right?

STALEY: Mostly I was restricted to North

America and Europe, I lived in North Africa a few times at the ___?___ Air Base down in Tripoli [then] I was in Germany.

NELSON: Well, where were you at and how did you hear about VE Day?

STALEY: I was down at Galveston, Texas, going through a supervisory gunnery course. Me and another pilot out of the 359th went down from Abilene, Texas, where we were instructed to take this gunnery course.

NELSON: How about VJ Day?

STALEY: VJ Day I was at Abilene yet. I can't recall any thing in particular except we were instructed not to participate in any celebrations on both the camps.

NELSON: Took all the fun out of it. What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese civilians in August '45?

STALEY: I think it saved a lot of American lives probably eventually it would have saved a lot of Japanese lives because if had gone on conventional there would have been as much destruction as there was with the use of the A-bomb I am sure.

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

STALEY: No.

NELSON: When and where were you officially discharged.

STALEY: I returned from Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois on the 31st of October 1963.

NELSON: Do you have any disability rating or pension?

STALEY: I have a 50% disability rating.

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

STALEY: Currently or...

NELSON: Currently.

STALEY: Currently. I am a little worried about the drastic draw down of military forces now because there is no strength in weakness in political dealings.

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

STALEY: On occasion. I go up to the V. A. Hospital in Madison.

NELSON: Okay. What's your opinion of the Veterans' Administration?

STALEY: I guess they do the best they can. I haven't had any difficulty with them.

NELSON: Have you ever gone to the V. A. Hospital for medical services?

STALEY: Right.

NELSON: If so what was your opinion of the care you received?

STALEY: It was adequate. In fact it must have been pretty good.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us about your families support in your military life?

STALEY: Well we stayed in contact and get home on leave on occasion. My wife, of course, traveled with me from the time the war was over. From the time I came back from combat. We were married in 1943 when I was up on Long Island. So we just celebrated our 51st anniversary. I met her when I was in primary flight school.

NELSON: Congratulations. Over the subsequent years, what has this support meant to you?

STALEY: It's kept life interesting.

NELSON: Is there anything else you would like to mention that you hadn't mentioned before?

STALEY: Well, since this is mostly for the residents of the State of Illinois, I guess I probably could qualify because I was down at Belleville, Illinois, twice. I was a private, the first time I was a Captain the next time I went there, I Lived there for a little over a year. Then I was down at Chanute for a little over 6 years before I retired. It was the only way I could get out of the recruiting service.

NELSON: Okay. That was a good interview.