

# Raymond L. Purfeerst

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## Raymond L. Purfeerst

Hello. Today is July 13, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village and Museum in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with a statewide effort to collect oral histories of Illinois Citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of the Midway Village in Rockford, Illinois, interviewing Mr. Ray Purfeerst. Mr. Purfeerst served in a branch of the Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

**NELSON:** Ray, will you please start by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name and place and date of birth.

**PURFEERST:** My name is Ray Purfeerst. I was born in Wisconsin in the small town of River Falls.

**NELSON:** Would also like to give the names of each of your parents?

**PURFEERST:** My mother's name was Luella and my father's name was Louis.

**NELSON:** Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**PURFEERST:** I had two brothers and two sisters.

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

**PURFEERST:** Yes, my father had a general store in Northern Wisconsin in the small town of Cornell. I worked in the store with my dad from the time I was 12 years old and graduated from school in my little town in 1941.

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

**PURFEERST:** 1941 was the year I graduated from high school. In Northern Wisconsin at that time it was just coming out of the depression. There was very little work to be had for a young

person. At that time, I think, we were probably making 25 cents an hour. In the middle of that summer in July I was still 17 and I left home looking for work and ended up in Beloit, Wisconsin. That's where I got my first job.

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

**PURFEERST:** Being a German when the war started, I didn't have any opinions yet although I had read about the German invasion of Poland and Czechoslovakia and Austria. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 it made me aware of what was going on in the rest of the world.

**NELSON:** What year were you born?

**PURFEERST:** I was born November 22, 1923.

**NELSON:** How did you hear of the December 7, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? Where were you and what were you doing at that time?

**PURFEERST:** I remember it very clearly. I was sitting in the hotel lobby, a little hotel in Beloit, Wisconsin. There were probably 12 or 15 people sitting there on Sunday morning. I had just returned home from church. I called home but the hotel ...

**NELSON:** Was that the Caroline Hotel?

**PURFEERST:** No it was the old Gateway Hotel.

**NELSON:** What were your reaction and the response of those around you?

**PURFEERST:** Most of us didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was. I was — the newspaper office was about a half a block from the hotel lobby and everybody ran over there to see the bulletin stuck up in the window of the newspaper and they had a map there showing the loca-

tion of Pearl Harbor. If they had just said Hawaii, everyone would have known where it was.

**NELSON:** Had you formed any opinion or developed any feeling about what was taking place in Europe or Asia?

**PURFEERST:** Not really. When I graduated from high school one of the requirements was, in those days, you had to write a thesis in order to get your graduation certificate. It happened very strangely that I had written my thesis was about the US foreign policy in the Pacific and specifically Japan. I had done a little reading in high school about the trade problems we had been having with Japan.

**NELSON:** Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of Germany and Russia in Europe?

**PURFEERST:** Yes. Our civic teacher would bring newspapers to school when there was something going on in Europe particularly when they went into France or Holland.

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

**PURFEERST:** Not really. I didn't read that — mostly information simply came from newspapers and radios.

**NELSON:** What events led to your entrance into service? Were you already in the service or did you volunteer?

**PURFEERST:** I volunteered at the time I was still 18 and was just turning to my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday when I enlisted. I had seen these nice colored ads about being a pilot for the Air Force in those days and it seemed very exciting for a kid in those days. I did end up taking the mental examination and then the physical and before I knew it I was in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

**NELSON:** Was your response in entering the military service influenced by family and friends attitude toward the war that threatened national security or any other consideration?

**PURFEERST:** I think it was the threat that was going on in Europe at that time. Seven or eight countries had been overrun and if we didn't do something to stop it that we would be getting the same — having the same problems they were having in Europe.

**NELSON:** When and where were you inducted?

**PURFEERST:** I was inducted in Chicago. After I had taken the examinations we had to pass in order to become a pilot trainee, I took that test at Madison, Wisconsin, at the University there. There were about 120 of us who took the test and I believe there were 33 that passed the examination at that time.

**NELSON:** How old were you at that time?

**PURFEERST:** I was 18.

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

**PURFEERST:** We were sent to Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas. I thought to myself — this was in January of '42 — I thought surely that I was going to a warm climate having lived in Northern Wisconsin most of my life but I found out it was just as cold down there as it was in Wisconsin.

**NELSON:** That's where you took your basic training?

**PURFEERST:** Yes.

**NELSON:** You were trained to be a pilot?

**PURFEERST:** Yes.

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

**PURFEERST:** First of all we had to take special tests and examinations, at that time it was the Air Force Base at Kelley Field in San Antonio. After our basic training we went to Kelley Field to get a special type of test to qualify for pilot, bombardier or navigator or whatever it was going to be.

**NELSON:** Do you remember anything about these tests?

**PURFEERST:** Yes, we were put in — One of the tests, I remember, we were put in a chamber that simulated the high altitude. They would take the oxygen out of these — they were almost like a big tank — take the oxygen out and simulate a 10,000 foot altitude or a 20,000 foot altitude. And they did it primarily, to show us also what would happen when you lost oxygen. Many of the fellows would pass out because there was no oxygen at the simulated altitudes we were at.

**NELSON:** Tell us about any other training camps you attended.

**PURFEERST:** Because there were—at that time I think they were taking the trainees in as fast as they could handle them, I was sent to a small college in Oklahoma, Shawnee a small town near Oklahoma City. At that school we had a crash course in engineering, aircraft engineering, mathematics and so on. Also they had special people there to get us into better physical shape, too, to be able to handle the duties that we would have.

**NELSON:** Did you have leaves or passes?

**PURFEERST:** Yes. After each area of training that we went through, like our primary training, before we would go to the next bigger airplane that we would learn to fly, we would get a pass between each of these schools. It was usually like a ten-day pass and we would come back and start another series of training.

**NELSON:** How did you use these passes?

**PURFEERST:** In those days, there wasn't airplanes available and many of us, at that time, we could get special rates on the trains. I would take a train to Chicago and then hitch hike to northern Wisconsin to visit my family.

**NELSON:** Did you ever try hitch hiking on a military plane?

**PURFEERST:** Yes, I did as a matter of fact. When I was in training at the Enid, Oklahoma, which was our basic training field, I did get a ride to a camp in Madison. At that time it was only like a five-hour ride to northern Wisconsin where my family lives.

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

**PURFEERST:** We were really treated unbelievably nice by the civilians in the towns that I trained in. Being that it was the first time that I was away from home and I was quite young holidays were very difficult because you were generally home. Every town we were at, someone would have a list of families that would take the cadets to a—like Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas dinner, whatever it happened to be. When I was in Lake Charles, Louisiana, which was basically the final training to go overseas for combat, is where I met my wife, Lee. After the war was over, we were married.

**NELSON:** Wonderful. You were in the Air Force at that time assigned duty was a pilot.

**PURFEERST:** Yes.

**NELSON:** Where did you go after completing your basic military training before sending you overseas?

**PURFEERST:** We picked up our crew in Lake Charles, Louisiana. That was called transitional training where you did simulated combat bombing and formation flying and so on. We were then sent to England. We took a train from Lake Charles, Louisiana, to the East Coast. I can't quite remember—Savannah, Georgia, I believe it was. Then we went by train up to New York and left for Europe and we went on the—At that time it was called the Ile de France. It had been taken over by the United States as a troop carrier. We went from the United States into Europe. At that time, it was the second largest transport. Next to the Queen Mary, it was the second largest boat in the water at that time.

**NELSON:** You went on a convoy over there?

**PURFEERST:** Yes. We went on a night convoy. It was—I think it was five days and five nights we had—Of course at that time the submarine scare was very bad and everything was black-out. You looked out and you couldn't see anything.

**NELSON:** Did you have any experiences where destroyers were trying to get these submarines?

**PURFEERST:** No. By the time I was going over the Allies by that time had pretty much control of the Atlantic. Fortunately we had no experiences with the submarines the Germans had.

**NELSON:** When you got overseas what were you assigned to do?

**PURFEERST:** We were in England about a month. They had already crossed—D-Day had already taken place and there were already bases being established at that time in France. So from England we flew into France and were assigned to the 387<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group 559<sup>th</sup> Squadron. We would—our planes were based on an old German Air Field that they had built in France. Our flight engineers had cleared out the airstrips from mines. We would set up our quarters on the German Air Field.

**NELSON:** What airplane were you assigned to?

**PURFEERST:** I was a pilot in a B26 twin engine medium bomber.

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

**PURFEERST:** By the time we got to Europe, before we got assigned to our squadrons, we spent about a month in England and at that time England was so full of American people they were very nice to us. The English people were so thankful to have someone helping them because they had just been literally run out of France by the German Army.

**NELSON:** Tell us about your experience of entering the first combat zone.

**PURFEERST:** This was in October of 1944. We had our first mission that I flew. We were going after bridges and tanks, communication centers. Our first mission we flew was over Cologne, Germany. We were going after railroad yards in that city.

**NELSON:** Can you list for us in order of occurrence all subsequent combat action in which you were involved or the ones that come to mind?

**PURFEERST:** It's been so long ago that it's hard to put them in any kind of order. I did fly twenty-six missions while we were in Europe. First we were on air bases in France and then one in Belgium and then one in Holland which is the one I was on when the war was over. Each of these fields we were at had been previously occupied by Germans and our engineers would go in and get them ready. We were following pretty much along the lines of the combat that was going on, on the ground. In many cases, in order to get target altitude we would have to go back toward England and then get to our altitude before we could go into Germany for our mission we were on at that particular time. A normal takeoff would put us, in some cases, too close to the German line.

**NELSON:** Did you get involved in different types of casualties, how they occurred and how they were treated—casualties with other members in your group.

**PURFEERST:** One event I remember happened on December 23<sup>rd</sup> during the time that the Battle of the Bulge was going on. We had drawn two missions that day and on the last mission, one of the planes came in that had difficulty in landing because it had lost its hydraulics and had no brakes. Another plane came in and crashed into that. He had a hung up bomb. We lost twenty-three men on our own base at that time because three airplanes were burned up in that crash.

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

**PURFEERST:** Yah, it probably did. I think when you are young you are a little bit immune to danger. During the time after the first couple of missions when we realized what was really going on and how good the Germans were with anti-aircraft fire, we did have a lot of fear in us as we took off and went on our mission into Germany.

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

**PURFEERST:** At the time that I went over the Allies had been getting pretty much control of the skies which helped us greatly because the German fighters weren't able to get to us. That did kind of change our feeling about what we were doing. When the German fighters couldn't get into our formations all we had to do was worry about the flak from the ground. That did make it easier for us to perform our missions.

**NELSON:** Did you have fighter escorts?

**PURFEERST:** Initially the fighters would follow us in about an hour into Germany and they would have to go back because they didn't have enough flight time in fuel. Slowly as the German lines went back, then the fighters were flying from France, too, instead of from England and I think in our last ten missions we had fighter escort in and out. That really made it seem like a milk run for every mission.

**NELSON:** You were on a B26. How many man crew did you have?

**PURFEERST:** We had a six-man crew: a pilot and co-pilot, a navigator-bombardier. He performed both duties. We had a radio man who was also a gunner, we had a tail gunner and we had an engineer who was also a gunner.

**NELSON:** Top turret.

**PURFEERST:** Top turret, yes.

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

**PURFEERST:** Yes, I wrote at least once a week and I had at that time both of my brothers

were also in the service. I had two sisters at home at the time so I wrote either to my sisters or to my parents.

**NELSON:** Did they ever send any packages?

**PURFEERST:** Yes, as a matter of fact, I did get packages. Sometimes it would be canned fruit or something that we could have as kind of a special dessert sometime. Sometimes they would send \_\_?\_\_ or some things they thought we might need.

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

**PURFEERST:** Yes. There was a lot of correspondence, I guess, with men in the service and their parents. In those times, the officers of our squadron were assigned to do, I can't think of the word I want—where we would check the mail. We would censor it to see that some information that might possibly get through that could be considered dangerous to the get out into the public so I was probably aware of it more than most people might be.

**NELSON:** I didn't know that, until years afterwards our pilot always checked the mail before it was sent out. I didn't know that.

**PURFEERST:** Yes. I did that.

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

**PURFEERST:** Yes, I did. I had two in particular. One is his name is Bill Prince. He happened to be from Arizona. We went through our training classes together in each of the series of training we had. We remained friends and corresponded for about forty years after the war was over. Another friend was my tail gunner on my crew. His name was Joe Geharty. He was a Brooklyn boy and I corresponded with him for probably about thirty years after the war.

**NELSON:** Did you ever have any reunions where the whole crew got together?

**PURFEERST:** No, we didn't have any reunions. I wish we would have. I wish there would have been some effort in those days where we could have maintained a closer contact with each other.

**NELSON:** This has to do with injuries in the field. You probably—were you ever involved in anyone who was injured on the airplane?

**PURFEERST:** Fortunately, no. Several times we had heavy battle damage to the plane but we did not have any injuries. We came close once when we had a forced landing on British Spitfire field near Brussels, Belgium. No one was hurt in that accident.

**NELSON:** You never did tell me about your squadron or the name of your airplane.

**PURFEERST:** Yes. I flew a B26.

**NELSON:** Did it have a name on it?

**PURFEERST:** The ones that we had were new planes that were just coming in from the States and we did not have a name on it at that time.

**NELSON:** What group were you with?

**PURFEERST:** The 387<sup>th</sup> Ground and the 559<sup>th</sup> Squadron.

**NELSON:** Okay. Good. Did you ever get involved in liberating any enemy prisoners in concentration camps?

**PURFEERST:** No, I didn't. I did find out about them though. I lived in a tent with a group of our intelligent officers and they had received this information from the ground forces.

**NELSON:** Is that while you were in Holland?

**PURFEERST:** That was in Holland, yes.

**NELSON:** Did they have camps in Holland that you were aware of?

**PURFEERST:** No they didn't. From Holland they shipped those people into Poland or the eastern part of Germany.

**NELSON:** What was the high light of your combat experience or any other experience you can remember?

**PURFEERST:** I guess that anybody that was in Europe at the time that was referred to as the Battle of the Bulge which took place the last week of December or the early part of January, and because of bad weather, our planes had to wait for good weather to bomb the tanks that were threatening our ground forces. I remember particularly that we would get up about four in the morning and wait for the weather to clear. This went on for about at least a week when we finally got clearance and the first mission we flew that helped break up that German concentration near Bastogne. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> we flew double missions on that day and that was the beginning of the time that the German army was broken up and could no longer defend itself.

**NELSON:** Tell us about how you and the other men celebrated America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

**PURFEERST:** They did manage, with all of the things that were going on there, all the other things they needed to support our army, the cooks always seemed to be able to manage to get turkey or some other special food for those holidays. I think the airforce did have very good kitchen facilities.

**NELSON:** Were they good cooks?

**PURFEERST:** Yes, I can truthfully say that I don't have any bad memories of having bad food. The ground forces had to eat their canned foods and different type of rations. C-Rations was one. Those were probably not the best types of foods you would think of for a feast day.

**NELSON:** They had worse conditions than what you had in your camp?

**PURFEERST:** Oh, yes. In many cases we would be one hundred miles or so in back of the

lines and what ever was available at that time, either through our own kitchens or what we could get from civilians we managed to eat pretty good.

**NELSON:** Did you sleep in huts or camp tents or what did you sleep in?

**PURFEERST:** We were in tents, four men to a tent. And the reason for that was that we were moving quite often in a period of like nine months, we were on four airfields. We never did have regular quarters and never lived in a building. I lived in a tent for almost two years.

**NELSON:** How did you heat these tents?

**PURFEERST:** There was a big pot-belly stove in the middle of the tent and the smoke stack went up through the center along the post that went up through the center of the tent. The fuel, we had to scrounge to get what was around, what we could find. In some cases we would even trade candy, or gum or cigarettes to civilians if we could find some wood that we could burn. Any place there was a bombed out building there was nothing left there but bricks because the wood was all taken out.

**NELSON:** Coal wasn't available.

**PURFEERST:** No. Towards the end of the war they did get some — primarily so that they could have it to heat water with.

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

**PURFEERST:** We had orders that we would be leaving some where around the 15<sup>th</sup> and at that time the war had been over in Japan. We had been training to go to the Japanese theater and we went down to Northern Africa and then over to India and Burma and that area. However, when the war was over, we didn't know what to do with our airplanes so we flew several of our squadrons into a small field in Germany. They cut them up with torches and then burnt them. We waited then for the boat to go home. We did arrive in the United States in January, the first part of January, of 1946.

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

**PURFEERST:** I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. Considering my age at the time, I guess I was one of the younger ones that was an officer. I was commissioned just before my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. I remember the missions during the Battle of the Bulge which was the turning point of the war. At that time we were awarded what they called the Presidential Unit Citation. It's probably similar to the Distinguished Flying Cross that was awarded to every member of our squadron for our performance on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of December in 1944.

**NELSON:** Okay and you also got the Air Medal.

**PURFEERST:** Yes, I got the Air Medal as usual.

**NELSON:** You did say how many missions you were on.

**PURFEERST:** I flew twenty-six missions.

**NELSON:** Twenty-six missions. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

**PURFEERST:** The fellowship in the Air Force, I think, is probably the greatest thing that ever happened to me. The officers and the men were so close together and had close personal contact, we were more like brothers, I think, than we were officers and enlisted men. It seems to me now there was really no distinction of rank other than when we were in the plane we were performing the duties we were supposed to perform. Most of our short passes I had in Europe, our entire crew went out together when we had time off.

**NELSON:** What are the things you would do differently if you could do them once again?

**PURFEERST:** I think if I could do it all over, I think what I would do is make a special effort to have better contact with all of the crew mem-



bers. We kind of went about our own problems and duties when we became civilians and probably neglected those contacts we should have made.

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

**PURFEERST:** I think the most difficult thing was when we got on the boat going to Europe. I was still not twenty-one years old yet. Leaving the shores of the United States was the most difficult thing for me that I can remember.

**NELSON:** Probably not knowing if you'd ever see those shores again.

**PURFEERST:** That's right.

**NELSON:** Is there anything that stands out as your most successfully achievement in your military service?

**PURFEERST:** I think that the thing that stands out most in my memory was the fact that when I enlisted they had just changed the rules of enlistment and requirements you had to have. In those days, prior to my enlistment, the required you to have a college degree in engineering or something that would make them easier to train for flying on an assigned crew. I remember when I took this test at that time they changed it so if you passed equivalency examination you were qualified to become a cadet in the Air Force. And the fact that I was one of those who passed the test was probably the turning point of my life.

**NELSON:** In cadet training what type of training did they give you mostly?

**PURFEERST:** Surprisingly the ground classes training that we had in engineering and the mechanical parts of flying was in every step we took whether it would be in primary or basic events of flying, the ground training was as important as the flight training.

**NELSON:** Did you ever have any close calls on your training?

**PURFEERST:** Not really. I remember in our first flight, my first time in an airplane in my primary training, the pilot took us up and would fly us around to see if we would be subject to are sickness and so on. I didn't know what he was doing at the time but he cut the switch at the end of the runway and did a dead stick landing and scared the hell out of me.

**NELSON:** This has to be about Europe. How did you learn about VE Day and what was reaction to it?

**PURFEERST:** The fact that I lived in the tent with the intelligence officer, I think I probably knew what was going on before a lot of the other people did. When they were having the meetings, I think Eisenhower and Montgomery from England were meeting with German officers to sign the surrender, I knew about that two or three days before it was published.

**NELSON:** How about VJ Day? What was your reaction to that?

**PURFEERST:** That was another great day in my life because we were training to go from Europe over to the Pacific Theater and when we heard about that everybody was really happy that we wouldn't have to go over there.

**NELSON:** What was opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against the Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

**PURFEERST:** I think it was probably the best thing that ever happened to end that war as fast as they did. The number of casualties and deaths that would have taken place if we had to go on the Japanese homeland beaches and fight for that ground, I think it probably would have been much, much worse then having dropped the bomb.

**NELSON:** I understand too that most of the civilians were armed at that time.

**PURFEERST:** Oh yes. They were.

**NELSON:** To defend their country.

**PURFEERST:** It was estimated that a half a million people would have been killed if they had to make an invasion.

**NELSON:** Has that opinion changed over the last fifty years?

**PURFEERST:** No, I still feel the same way. To me, the person who had to make that final decision was probably the most difficult he ever did. I think it was President Truman at the time that gave the okay for that.

**NELSON:** When and where were you discharged from the Service?

**PURFEERST:** I was discharged in January of 1946 from Fort Sheridan in Chicago Illinois.

**NELSON:** Do you have any disability rating or pension?

**PURFEERST:** No, I was fortunate and didn't have any bad injuries.

**NELSON:** Do you have any opinions or feelings about our Nation's military status or policies?

**PURFEERST:** You mean today's military? I think that they need a defensive force is very important and is one thing that seems to be bipartisan even in Washington. Our government people are managing to keep a good defense force.

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

**PURFEERST:** Other than my old GI insurance which I still have carried I have no contact with them.

**NELSON:** That was a smart decision to keep that, wasn't it?

**PURFEERST:** It sure was. It turned out to be the best things I did when I got out.

**NELSON:** Would you like to tell us how your family supported you during your Military life?

**PURFEERST:** The fact that I was the first one in our family to go into Service I did, matter of fact I surprised my parents when I enlisted. I did that right when I turned eighteen. I did get lots of mail from them and encouragement from them to do the best I could.

**NELSON:** I imagine they were very proud of you.

**PURFEERST:** Yes, in those days every able-person was in the service in the age group probably from eighteen to thirty-five. The fact that I was the first one of our family that went into service, I'm sure they were very proud of me.

**NELSON:** In the subsequent years what has this support meant to you?

**PURFEERST:** It's been so long now; some of those memories are so far back in my mind, I find it difficult to remember them. When I see some of the old pictures we have at home when I was in uniform at that time, of course, my parents were quite young; it meant a lot to me that they supported me.

**NELSON:** Ray that was a very good interview. Is there anything else you would like to mention that we haven't covered?

**PURFEERST:** No, not really. I think I have given you most of the things I can remember.

**NELSON:** Thank you very much.