

Russell Peacock

Interviewed by Chuck Nelson
Midway Village and Museum Center
6799 Guilford Road
Rockford, Illinois 61109
Phone – 815 397 2112

Russell Peacock

We are in the office of the Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois. We are interviewing Mr. Russell Peacock who served in the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

NELSON: Russell, would you please start by introducing yourself. Please give us your full name, date and place of birth. We would also like to know the names of you parents and if you had any brothers and sisters.

PEACOCK: My name is Russell Peacock and I was born January 1, 1925. Not the first baby born. I was a born loser, second born. My parents were Charles W. Peacock and Mary Peacock. I have one brother, Glen, and one sister, Shirley.

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

PEACOCK: My parents died quite young and my sister died when she was 28 years old. My Dad and my sister died from sugar diabetes. My brother is still living, he and I. He is a veteran, too.

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

PEACOCK: My dad owned a lumberyard and I worked in the lumberyard part time and I was going to school at the time.

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

PEACOCK: I really wasn't particularly interested in it because—I read the papers and so on but I never felt that I would ever have to get in it, but I did.

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

PEACOCK: This is quite interesting because my sister was going with one of the soldiers from Camp Grant. On this particular Sunday morning my dad, brother and I took this young soldier and we went hunting out in the country. We left early in the morning and when we got back around noontime, we immediately heard about the bombing to see the look on this young soldiers' face at the time it would be something to really remember because I think it scared him terrible.

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

PEACOCK: Not at the time, no. I don't think I really knew too much about it.

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

PEACOCK: Oh, yes. I remember that. I thought that was terrible.

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

PEACOCK: Not really, no.

NELSON: What events led to your entering into military service: Were you already in the service, draft or did you volunteer?

PEACOCK: I was drafted. As a matter of fact, I was drafted right out of school. But I did get a delay. They wanted me to go before I even graduated. I did get a delay so that instead of going in May, I went in September.

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

PEACOCK: My brother was in the service at the time. He is older than I am m. I kind of looked up to him and followed in his footsteps. I was not sorry to go.

NELSON: When and where were you inducted?

PEACOCK: I was inducted in at Camp Grant, Illinois.

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

PEACOCK: No, except that one interesting thing, when I was working for the lumberyard, we used to sell chunk wood to Camp Grant that they used for the cook stoves on the troop trains. About a week before I went into the service I hauled a load of wood out there. Then after I got inducted out there, the next thing I knew, I was out there chopping the wood.

NELSON: How old were you at the time?

PEACOCK: I was 18.

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

PEACOCK: Well, at Camp Grant they put a list on the board—anyone that wanted to volunteer for cadet, to be aviation cadet could sign up. So I thought it would probably be better to fly than to have to walk. So I signed up for aviation cadet.

NELSON: Where did you take your basic military training?

PEACOCK: I was sent down to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, and I took the basic training there.

NELSON: What were you trained to do?

PEACOCK: From Jefferson Barracks I was sent to Lawrey Field, Colorado. I went through 12 weeks of Armor School. After Lawrey field, I was sent to Timber Field, Florida, for 6 weeks of gunnery school. Actually what they called—what my title would be was an Armored Gunner.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

PEACOCK: I liked it. I really enjoyed it. I was number 1 in the class.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

PEACOCK: What?

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

PEACOCK: Not until I got back from overseas.

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

PEACOCK: I made a lot of friends, got along good with the fellows. At that time, it was easy to do. Once we got a crew, an airplane crew together, those fellows were your real buddies.

NELSON: You were assigned as an aerial gunner, as top turret gunner. Is that right?

PEACOCK: That was a ball turret gunner.

NELSON: Okay. Where did you go after completing your basic military training?

PEACOCK: Well that's when I went to Armor School and Gunnery School after basic training.

NELSON: Okay. When you were sent overseas, where did you go?

PEACOCK: We took overseas training down in Georgia and then I was sent up to New York City where our crew picked up a brand new B24J airplane. We flew it around there for a couple of hours and checked it out. From there we went up to Bangor, Maine, where we were issued overseas equipment. From there we went to Newfoundland—flew up to Newfoundland. From there we flew down to Azore Islands. From there we went to North Africa and from North Africa up to Italy where we were stationed at by Carinola, Italy.

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

PEACOCK: Oh, boy. That I remember quite well. The first flight mission that I went on was to Athens, Greece. My job was to make sure that all the bombs were out of the bomb bay and to watch for enemy planes and so on. I was so busy looking at the flack, and the planes and everything that I don't remember where the bombs went. They said we were bombing an airfield but I didn't see it.

NELSON: They didn't get hung up in the bomb bay?

PEACOCK: Anybody that says they are not scared on their first mission was lying—you were scared.

NELSON: Can you list for us in order of occurrence all subsequent combat action in which you were involved, just briefly.

PEACOCK: Well, I was on 18 missions. Of course, the first 5 missions that you fly when you get overseas, you split up from your own crew and you fly with a different crew so to get checked out. The pilot that we had at the time was flying with another crew and they got shot down over Vienna. So we were without a pilot. Then they sent another pilot over from the States by himself and he was assigned to our crew. One mission that—it was on my 5th mission—I really wasn't broke in too good but I remember that one quite well. There was the Black ___?___ oil refinery in Germany and they had sent up a barrage at the aircraft right ahead of us. I remember getting cuddled down in the waist of the plane, flack suits on me and staring at the side. The flack was breaking all around. All of a sudden there was a hole right in the side of the plane where I was staring. We dropped the bombs and flew through this flack. When we got back—we finally made it back to the base on 3 engines because one engine had a hole right through it, about a 6-inch hole right up through the engine. When we counted we had 78 holes in the plane. That was one of the worst ones that I was on. The navigator got hit in the face and the tail gunner got hit in the leg with some flack—wasn't anything serious but we did get hit pretty bad on that one.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

PEACOCK: I hated the Blue Danube River because I flew over Vienna they were shooting at us like crazy. I'll never sing that song again.

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

PEACOCK: I was hoping it would get over with. I didn't like it.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

PEACOCK: I wrote home, not probably as much as the family would like but I did correspond as much as possible. Wrote quite a few letters.

NELSON: Did you receive many letter and/or packages? If so, how often and what type of packages did you receive?

PEACOCK: Oh my folks, my mother was a good cook and she always sent cookies and candy and I'd get packages maybe once a month something like that.

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

PEACOCK: I think most fellows did. I think most fellows had families that they wrote to. It was always a big treat to make sure that you got a letter in the mail and to hear from home.

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

PEACOCK: Like I say, the crew that we had, I've kept in contact with most of them. Some of them have died but I have several that I keep pretty close contact with.

NELSON: Okay. Did you ever have to help rescue a wounded buddy from an airplane?

PEACOCK: Well, this one time when a fellow got hit but they weren't really serious. There

wasn't anything death defying but we did help them get out of the plane.

NELSON: You were never involved in the capture of prisoners or anything like that?

PEACOCK: No. No.

NELSON: Prior to the end of the war were you aware any civilian concentration camps existed, if so, please explain how you learned about them and how much you knew at the time.

PEACOCK: No, I didn't really know about any concentration camps that were there and I had no contact with them.

NELSON: You had nothing to do with liberating?

PEACOCK: No.

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

PEACOCK; Well something that was kind of breath taking and kind of interesting, not heroic or anything, but this new airplane we picked up at New York City and flew overseas. When we got over there, of course, they remodeled it. They do a lot of changing with that airplane and they were—all the ground crew, everybody was quite proud of that plane because it was the newest one that they'd seen. So they painted pictures on it and did a lot of work on it. Of course, they were dispersed out on the runway. One night we were sitting in our tent playing cards. We had candlelight and all of a sudden—it was about 9 o'clock at night—we heard a lot of shots—lot of shooting. My goodness, what could that be and so we run outside. We looked over toward the line and we could see a bunch of flashlights coming through the trees. It couldn't be enemy people because they don't come around with flashlights. So we couldn't figure what was happening. Then about that time we heard somebody called that the airplane was on fire and it was loaded with 500-pound bombs. So we had slit trenches there and I jumped in the slit trench and about 10 guys jumped in on top of

me. I thought this is no place for me so I crawled out of there and I started running fast with a couple of other guys. We started running out through—we were right in the grape vineyards, olive orchards—so we started running as fast as we could. We ran probably ½ mile and we flopped down under a tree. About that time that airplane exploded. There was fire up in the air and stuff flying in every direction, propellers up in the air. Well, after that was over with, we went back to our tent and that was full of holes. We were probably about 200 yards from where the plane blew up. It was full of big holes in that tent. That night everyone that wasn't on call for the next day had to go out on the runway and pick up all the pieces of the airplane and debris that was scattered all over the airfield so that the planes could take off the next morning. We didn't have to fly the next day so we were out there until about 3 o'clock in the morning clearing off the runway.

NELSON: Do you know what caused that fire?

PEACOCK: One of the fellows that were loading the bombs, in that bomb bay there is little petcocks that gasoline comes out of. Well, there is also, generator that generates electric and they can run the lights with. But they are not supposed to run both at the same time. Somebody opened the gas valve to wash their hands off and that ignited the generator and that started the fire. Well, with 100-octane gas it goes awful fast. The plane that we had flown over in and had all fixed up and a pretty picture on it was setting next to this plane. So that blew up, too. It took about 3 other planes out of existence, too. We had a hole in the ground about 100 feet across and about 20 feet deep where that plane had been setting. I can remember that quite well.

NELSON: Were there any injuries?

PEACOCK: Yeah. One guy broke his arm because he fell down when he was running. That was the only one that got hurt.

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

PEACOCK: Well, of course, being in the Air Force, we were probably lucky because they did have turkey and all the dressing. We had some real good cooks and they prepared good meals for us. We were lucky we had good cooks and they knew how to fix it real good.

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

PEACOCK: After the war was over, our pilot was Captain at the time and he was in command of the 759th bomb group. So he had to wait there until they closed up the camp. So he made arrangements for us to fly home with another pilot. So our crew got loaded up a B24 plane and we flew home. We flew from Italy down to Africa and down to [Natal], Brazil, or to Dakar, South Africa then across the water to [Natal], Brazil up to Cuba and up to Georgia. What was the name of the field in Georgia? I can still—we flew up to Hunter Field, Georgia. We were there a few days. That was an interesting thing, too. When we left Dakar, South Africa, we had to fly out over the water to Natal, Brazil. This is all over the water. We took our parachutes and piled them all in the corner. This plane that we were flying home was one of the old combat planes and it was not in very good shape. We got—we flew for 10½ hours and we got over by Brazil and then we went to put the wheels down to land at the field there, the one wheel would come down and lock and the other wheel only came half way. So the pilot put the wheels back up again, tried it again, only came halfway. Well, we'd been flying so long we didn't have much gas left. In fact, we ended up—we wouldn't have enough to circle the field once more. So the pilot said get your parachutes on. Anybody wants to bail out, get ready to bail out. Everybody made a dive for the parachutes and we come up one short. So I got the hatch open. I'm without a parachute. Got the hatch open and said, "I'm ready to go." The pilot said anybody that wanted to go could bail out when he give the order otherwise stay on the plane and it would land with the wheels up. Well, I wasn't going to stay on that plane so I got ready to bail out. He kept trying to get the wheels down and about that time the wheels went down and

locked. So we flew—we got in and landed and we didn't have 5 gallons of gas left in the tank. We couldn't have made it around once more. That was scary!

NELSON: You were very lucky there. Please tell us about your military rank and your decorations, especially your campaign decorations.

PEACOCK: Okay, I was Sergeant when we went over and I made Staff Sergeant. I was overseas and I got out as a Staff Sergeant. The ribbons we were given were the American Theater Ribbon, the European Theater Ribbon, Middle East Ribbon, Good Conduct Ribbon, Air Medal and Victory Medal.

NELSON: I think you said you were on 18 missions?

PEACOCK: Eighteen missions I was on.

NELSON: Okay. This is return to civilian life. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact while you were in service?

PEACOCK: I got along good. I only had one fight. I think I won that fight—I was, of course, I'm a little guy and I always made it a point then I got some place new, I'd make a buddy out of a great big guy. Several times I was happy that I had some buddies that were pretty big because they looked out for me.

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

PEACOCK: I don't think so. I was happy in there.

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

PEACOCK: The most difficult thing?

NELSON: Yes.

PEACOCK: The most difficult thing? I don't know.

NELSON: How about your first mission?

PEACOCK: The first mission, the first 5 missions were the most difficult thing because you really didn't know what to expect. You had to go on your own knowledge and the help of people you were flying with. I guess that would probably be about the hardest thing.

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

PEACOCK: The most successful—the thing that probably helped me the most was after I got home. After we got back here, I was assigned to a different duty. After we got back to the States and I had a 30-day furlough. After the furlough, I returned to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Then I was sent to Deming, New Mexico. We had so many guys and they wanted something for you to do so we were processed to find out what you might be able to achieve. So when I went through the line a fellow asked me if I knew how to type. I said, "Yeah, I know how to type". He said, "We've got just the job for you." I said, "Yeah, what's that?" He said, "Working in the recruiting office." "No," I said, "I want nothing to do with the recruiting." And he said, "Oh yeah. You'd probably like that. That's a good job." I said, "Well, okay." So he told me to report to Captain "so and so" over at headquarters building. So I went over to headquarters building and I wandered up and down the halls and I didn't see any recruiting office. I ran into a Captain that was looking the same way I was and I said, "Are you a Captain of the Recruiting Office?" He said, "Yeah." Then I introduced myself. He said, "You and I are supposed to start up this recruiting office." I said, "Oh, that's great." He says, "I think this empty office here where we are suppose to start up." He said, "Go down to supply and get some desks, typewriters, some chairs and so we went down and hauled up a bunch of desks and chairs and so on—filing cabinets. We opened up a recruiting office. We didn't know what we were doing so the captain and I in a few days, we got on a plane and flew down to Dallas, Texas, to be at a meeting with Washington people explaining about recruiting. When I walked into this room and there were

generals and Colonels and every kind of officer you can imagine, I was the only non-commissioned officer in there. Well, they explained the recruiting to us and gave us recruiting papers. So we went back and started up the recruiting office. We had people waiting to sign up again. Well, when I left there I had 7 men working under me. I have had 2 other officers that were in charge. I just had them come in once a day and swear the fellows in and then I told them to take off.

NELSON: Did you get any additional rank for that?

PEACOCK: No, I would have if I had stayed there. I was just on the verge of—I would have got more but they said it was time for me to go home. I said, "Well, I'm having too much fun. I want to stay." "No, you've got to go home." So I left.

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

PEACOCK: I was in Florida Gunnery School at the time and knew it should be coming up pretty soon and when I did hear about it, I was glad that I was in Florida and not over there.

NELSON: How about VJ Day?

PEACOCK: I was in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, when that came. As a matter of fact, I think we were being processed to go to Japan but I was glad it ended before we got there.

NELSON: What is your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese civilians in August of 1945.

PEACOCK: At the time I didn't really realize how extreme it was but I knew it was bad and glad that it ended the war. Too bad it had to be that way but it probably was the only thing that could have been done.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed over the past 50 years? If so, how?

PEACOCK: No, I didn't think it's any different. I think we're in a good country and I'm glad to be able to be apart of it. I think all the wars and stuff that is going on—It's too bad it has to be that way.

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

PEACOCK: I was discharged after I left Deming, New Mexico, I was sent to Truax Field in Madison, Wisconsin. I was discharged from there.

NELSON: Do you have a disability rating or pension?

PEACOCK: No, no definitely not.

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

PEACOCK: No. I think we had some good leaders. Like I say, it's too bad we have to fight to keep it that way. It's too bad that most of the countries can't be good. I guess they can't, so ...

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

PEACOCK: No, no.

NELSON: You have no opinion of the VA then?

PEACOCK: No, I don't.

NELSON: You have never been to a Veterans' Administration Hospital?

PEACOCK: Nope. I tried to get in but they wouldn't take me.

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

PEACOCK: Well, I know my father was not happy that my brother and I had to go to the service because he had to run the lumberyard all by himself. He had bought it at the time for a family

business but my brother left before I did and so my dad was not happy that we were gone but he made the best out of it he could. He was happy to see us come back home so we could help him. He had quite a struggle. He was not well at the time either. But he kept it going until we got back home.

NELSON: And you continued the business?

PEACOCK: Yes, we continued the business. As a matter of fact I stayed in it for 47 years.

NELSON: During the subsequent years what has the support meant to you?

PEACOCK: What do you mean?

NELSON: The help that you got while you were in service and the support you got from your family. How did that ...

PEACOCK: Oh, I think it made us closer together and especially with my brother. My brother and I are pretty close. My folks died quite young and it wasn't too long after we were home they were—my dad was only 55. I could do more at my age now than he could when he was 50 years old. I just wish that he could still be here.

NELSON: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

PEACOCK: No. That pretty well takes care of it. One other thing that I think I'm quite proud of is the fact that while I was overseas I was part of the lead crew. We were the lead plane on the 200th mission of the 459th bombing group of the 759th bomb squadron. We bombed some railroad yards in Augsburg, Germany. I was part of that crew and we had some—at the time, we had some big officers flying with us. I remember when we got back to the field the colonel was there, the general and Red Cross group. Everybody was out there and took pictures. This picture I have here. I was quite proud to be a part of that crew.

NELSON: That wasn't your last mission?

PEACOCK: No. That was probably in the middle I guess.

NELSON: Well, thank you, Russ. That was great. Thank you very much.