

Russell Sanden

Transcribed
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Russell Sanden

Hello. Today is February 2nd, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village and Museum Center which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated with the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village and Museum Center and we are talking to Mr. Russell G. Sanden of 3917 Crosby Street, Rockford, Illinois, who served in the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

N: Russell, would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name, place and date of birth.

S: My name is Russell George Sanden. I was born in Rockford Illinois November 17th, 1924.

N: We would also like to have names of each of you parents.

S: My father was George Benjamin Sanden and my mother was Evelyn Frances Larson. That would be her maiden name, of course.

N: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

S: No. I did not.

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

S: Well, my father served in World War I in France if that's of any consequence here.

N: Okay. What was it like for you before the war, specifically during 1941?

S: Well, in 1941 I was still going to high school, East Rockford High School. I didn't graduate from there until June of 1943.

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

S: Well, that would be during the time Britain and France and other countries were involved with Germany and I was rather surprised that things were going so badly in Europe at that time. I thought that the allies should have been doing much better than what was happening at that time.

N: How did you hear about the December 7th, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so, where were you and what were you doing at that time? What was your reaction and response of those around you?

S: Well, this is a high school kid laying on his stomach in the living room, listening to some news broadcast or whatever program it was, I don't know. But it was interrupted by the

news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. But it was early Sunday afternoon before I had got started with any other activities that day.

N: What was your reaction?

S: I thought it was rather audacious that this little country of Japan would attack the United States. (Laughter)

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

S: As I said before, I was unhappy with the progress of the war in Europe but not having any prior experience, of course, I didn't know what was really going on there. And then as far as the Pacific was concerned, that was just one vast ocean out there that I wasn't too aware of many of the names that we would become familiar with later. I was mostly concerned—Well, I don't know “mostly”, but I was also concerned about the events in Africa. What the Italian forces had been working around Ethiopia there and rather taking advantage of those people there that were not as well equipped or trained as the Italian Army. Of course, I was concerned about what the Japanese had been doing in China and Manchuria.

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

S: A small amount of knowledge as news reports and there was at that time, if you ever go to a movie, there was always news section there. My opinion of him was sort of a raving maniac.

N: What events led to your entering into military service? Were you already in service, drafted or did you volunteer?

S: As a kid just getting out of high school in June of 1943, I was automatically drafted.

N: Was your response to entering military service influenced by family and friends' attitude towards the war, the threat to National Security or any other considerations?

S: Well, actually not. It was just a matter of you sign up with the draft and then you go when they ask you to.

N: You were drafted?

S: Yes.

N: When and where were you when you were inducted?

S: At Camp Grant.

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

S: Well, yes. I could not figure out why I was staying there so long.

There were a few of us that kept getting tests and more physical tests, more written tests. Everybody else was shipping out to places that I never heard of before but a few of us were still around until finally somebody said, "Well now this group is going to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri."

N: How old were you at that time?

S: I was 18.

N: Where did you take your basic military training?

S: Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

N: What were you trained to do?

S: Well, basic training as such was no big deal for me because I had been in the ROTC program at East Rockford under the company commander there. My major concern was keeping warm in that wet, cold Missouri winter, in those 6-man tents we were living in.

N: What did you think of the training?

S: Oh, it was fine.

N: Did anything special happen there?

S: No, other than that there were more tests along with the basic stuff. Then I was informed that instead of being in the coast artillery that I thought I would like to be in, why they told me I was going to be an Aviation Cadet.

We were sent to Carbondale, Southern Illinois at Normal, at that time.

N: Did you have any leaves or passes?

S: At that time, no.

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

S: Well, I didn't associate with very many civilians. I was rather a, shall we say, a kid that hadn't been away from home all that much before. I stayed pretty much in the school area there. Of course, there were other civilians going to Carbondale and relations with them were very nice. I remember one thing that the cadet program people there were had fun with. There was another detachment there from the Marine Air Force or Air Corps. We had a little habit of, when we marched from one class to the next, we would sing the Marine Hymn to the tune of "Clementine." It worked real well but it was quite annoying to them.

N: What was your military unit?

S: At what point?

N: At this point—that you were in the Air Force?

S: Aviation cadet.

N: What were your assigned duties?

S: Well, get decent grades in the classes and we also did a certain amount of flying. We had to get in ten hours in a Cub over at a small airport at Marion, Illinois. I guess that was just to weed out the guys that couldn't get their feet off the ground without "tossing their cookies". A remarkable number of people have this problem but then after that we went to San Antonio, Texas. Then at that point they sorted out a certain group of us and that group was assigned, supposedly, to be in a pilot program on the P-38 which was a fighter plane at that time.

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

S: Oh, well, there was a few other things happened in between before I went overseas. One cold morning in San Antonio we were rushed out about 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the morning with a GI raincoat and shoes and not much else on for some sort of formation. Now this was a little bit unusual and it was very unusual when the Colonel in charge of our school there was up. He never got up that early. But then we were informed that we were going to be--how would they say it? --relieved at the convenience of the government, eliminated without prejudice at the convenience of the government. That's the way they put it. In other words they hadn't lost as many P-38 "Jockeys". They weren't

going to need us after all. We were given the opportunity either going to Infantry Officer Candidate School or Aerial Gunnery. By that time I had decided I wanted to fly so I volunteered for gunnery. I went out to Kingman, Arizona. The field out there for gunnery training and then...

N: Do you remember what date that was approximately?

S: That would be sometime in the summer of '44. When we got through at Kingman, that was only six weeks or something for gunnery school. There I specialized in the revolving ball turret, then went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for assignment for the rest of the crew and for further training in B-17 aircraft. Then down to Louisiana near Alexandria, Louisiana, for overseas training unit.

N: What did you think of our nation's war effort up to this point?

S: Well, I thought things were getting turned around and they were going our way. It was still touch and go out in the Pacific and that the European thing was—there had been some invasions and we were out of North Africa and onto the European Continent from the south. We had gone from England and opened up the beachhead in France, of course, D-Day.

N: Now when you entered in a combat zone, what group were you attached to?

S: I was attached to the 15th Air Force, 301st Bomber Group, 353rd Bomb Squadron.

N: And what was the name of you pilot?

S: The name of the pilot was William Hull.

N: And he was from where?

S: [Cheektowaga], New York. You want me to spell that for you?

N: No. That's fine.

S: It's near Buffalo.

N: Tell us your experience in entering your first combat zone.

S: Well, the first time we flew as a crew in formation on a raid was over we went over Vienna, Austria. There was a suburb of Vienna called [Floridsdorf] where an oil refinery was located. We encountered rather heavy flack. Took one burst off the tail, lost our rudder so we couldn't hold formation any more. But the really bad part of it was we lost the tail gunner. One hand of his was blown up into the waist of the ship. We later found that after we landed. We didn't know if there was anything left of

Neal. But kind of sad too, because this man had flown his 25 missions in Europe on a B-17 as a tail gunner and came back to the United States. His nerves were not the best and he just didn't take kindly to the "spit and polish" of the Air Force back in the States and so he volunteered for the 2nd tour of duty and we lost him. His name was Leo Werderisch.

N: Where was he from?

S: Chicago. Werderisch.

N: Taking these one at a time, please tell us in full detail, if possible, the approximate number and types of casualties, how they occurred and how they were treated.

N: Were there any other casualties or injuries in your tour of duty?

S: Yes, there were several purple hearts given out on the crew. I didn't get any. Down in the belly turret it looked scary but I found out since then that statistically it was a good place to be. But then the day after the war was over—well, not immediately the day after but a few days after we were told that we had to take our airplane back to the states. We had a couple of rather tired engines by that time and there was a couple of new engines down at the maintenance shed that we were told we could have. So they were put on and we went out to get a few hours on them before we

tackled the Atlantic hop. We didn't want to do it with brand new engines so—break them in. Well, we took a little ride up across Italy and visited a few places like couple Mount Vesuvius, Naples, Florence and the canals of Venice and Rome and flew up north through the Brenner area. We were rather low because we didn't have oxygen with us but we thought we could go through the Brenner Pass. But then we were following the railroad tracks and they went left into a tunnel. The navigator informed the pilot, "You better turn right at the next corner." There was kind of fork in the pass but we flew into a blank canyon. It wasn't on the navigator's map. It's true that this hump at the end of the canyon wasn't as high as the rest of the Alps but it was high enough to catch us.

N: And you crashed.

S: We burned. We exploded.

S: Well, nobody was quite killed. We all got out, more or less.

N: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

S: Well.

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

S: Like everyone else, I was rather intimidated by the whole thing. I didn't

particularly care for the idea of being shot at but it was part of the deal I guess.

N: Did you write any letters home?

S: Oh, yes.

N: Did you receive any letters or packages, if so, how often? What types of things did you receive from home.

S: Well, many letters. Almost daily there were letters. Once a month or so there was some food stuffs that would make it through. What I sent home for and really appreciated was an earphone and a couple of radio tubes and some radio parts so that I could put a small radio together and listen to various things. It was one notch above a crystal set. It did have a variable condenser to select stations.

N: Did most of the other men write or receive letters?

S: Oh, yes. It was a common thing.

N: Did you forge close bonds of friendships with many or some of your combat companions?

S: Just a few. Actually it was kind of a weird situation. We didn't really get too close to other crews because you'd lose them. One day you got some good buddies in the tent next to you and the next day someone's

cleaning out their luggage. We were very close to the 10 men that flew in the B-17 but not real close to others. Let me take one or two exceptions to that. One of the Rockford fellows that I had gone to high school with was Peter Kostanicus, was a co-pilot on a B-17 in my group. I was, if you want to call it close to him and also another friend of mine, not a friend, a cousin from Rockford, was in a B-24 outfit over in Luchara(?) which was pretty close to ___?___. We were based incidentally at ___?___, the 301st. He was with a B-24 outfit as a flight engineer. His name is Roger Storm.

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

S: Yes.

N: Did you ever have to help retrieve a wounded buddy from a field of combat which in your case would be an airplane?

S: That's difficult. (Laughter) I could not walk on those clouds.

N: What was the high light occurrence of your combat experience?

S: I want to say the thing that I remember most was that crash in the Alps. (Laughter) That's hard to forget.

N: Okay. Tell us what you and your other men did to celebrate America's

traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

S: We waded around in the mud as usual and I suppose the main celebration would be a real decent meal at the mess hall but that's about the extent of the celebration. We didn't put up and Christmas tree or Halloween decorations or anything.

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

S: Well, we got out of the hospital (Laughter) and some stayed longer than others. I was assigned to go home as a—Well, in leaving the hospital, for some reason, there was a replacement crew fresh from the States that flew into that particular airport that was closest to that hospital in northern Italy. When it was time to go back to ___?___ I was sent home as a passenger. Well, from the hospital in northern Italy to ___?___ which is about half way down the boot on the Adriatic side, it wasn't all that much. Here was the inexperienced pilot landing a plane that still had all its gasoline and full crew with all their luggage and several passengers and he just cut the throttles a little bit too soon and this thing sunk a little bit faster but that is when we got to ___?___ and we were going to land. ___?___ had been designated as a place for—what would you call it—overseas equipment preparation area.

N: Supply center?

S: Yeah, they were lengthening the runways and lengthening the approach areas. One of the army engineers had been out there with a D8 caterpillar clearing some trees, olive trees from the end of the approach area. But he had gone to lunch and left the “cat” sitting there in the middle of the approach area. Of course, this guy that was coming in with a B-17, a little heavier loaded. I got to give him credit. He didn’t try to stretch his glide and stall it out and crash the whole thing. What he did do, not give it any more. He didn’t give it a little bit more throttle to reach over there where the runway was. He had to hit that caterpillar. So in ten days we got to crack-ups. By this time I’m ready to walk.

N: How many missions did you fly?

S: I only flew 15.

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

S: What happened?

N: Where did you go when you landed in the United States?

S: Well, first place—incidentally after that second crash, I was sent home as a passenger on a B-24. We had to cross the Mediterranean to North Africa, [Marrakesh] or something like

that. Then over to Dakar, French West Africa then across to [Belem], Brazil, and up to Georgetown, British Guyana, and from there to a place in Georgia, but I—It slipped my mind at the moment. Any way it was a good-sized airfield in Georgia.

N: Savanna?

S: Could have been near Savanna. But there was a whole bunch of airplanes, whole bunch of people. We were more or less getting rid of some older clothing and issued better, newer uniforms.

N: What was your rank and your decorations, especially campaign decorations?

S: Okay. As a ball turret gunner, I was automatically a Sergeant. Decorations were air medal with two oak leaf clusters, European Theater. Let’s see. How many battle stars were there? There’s one for the North ___?___ Campaign, one for the Po Valley campaign, one for Southern France, another for the Southern Europe and another one for Eastern Europe. We had been involved—it was only fifteen missions but we were scattered all over the place. Mostly we were bombing from between 28 and 30 thousand feet and going over after oil refineries and ___?___ yards. We also had gotten ground support missions in there. We were dropping clusters of white frost versus high fragmentation.

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

S: Fine.

N: Were there any things you would do differently if you could do them once again?

S: (Long pause). Well, perhaps but nothing that comes to mind. After all, you're dealing with a kid fresh out of high school. I didn't know how to do too much other than just do what I was told.

N: What was the most difficult thing you had to do during the period of material service?

S: The most difficult thing was to actually shoot at a person that I could see. That was during the Po Valley Campaign. We had come over at tree top level, you see. The Po River is like the Mississippi. It's wide, a lot of slough on both sides of it and the ground forces were having a terrible time getting across that river because the Nazi Artillery on the other side was giving them a bad time. We were suppose to go on the north side of the Po River, which essentially flows east and west, and take out some of these mortar and artillery outfits. I was down there in the belly turret. Things were going past, about 180 miles an hour. You don't see too much out of that little round window but here was

here was a bunch of tracers coming up from the ground. I swung the turret around over there and here was this guy with a half-track, with machine gun mounted on top, was shooting at us. I thought if you're shooting at me, I'm going to shoot back. That half-track was no match for those 250 caliber machine guns and it's very computing sights. One burst and that half-track went up in flames. That bothered me a lot, because up to that point I'd never seen a person that I had to shoot at. Don't think I hit him but I hit his vehicle and him but he probably fried.

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

S: Well, I thought it was real great but we didn't do an awful lot.

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

S: Well, at that time I was out in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. We were sent there ostensibly to train for B-29s. There was a certain amount of rejoicing if you could call it that.

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

S: Well, being that I'd been involved in dropping bombs, this was just a bigger bang.

N: What were your feelings toward it?

S: I thought we had one more new tool to use.

N: Has your opinion changed over the last years and, if so, how?

S: I now realize what a large tool that turned out to be. Before I thought when I heard about it, we had a new bomb, fine—a bigger bang. But now I realize, of course, that there were literally thousands of people killed in that—there were two blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In time of war it makes sense to end this thing as soon as possible. It's like a game of chess. You capture the king. If there is anybody else left around well that's fine. It's not a matter of attrition. It doesn't have to be a matter of attrition. If you can effect a surrender without one by one eliminating all of the enemy, in the long run it's a good deal because it stops things quicker and not all of the enemy have to die.

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

S: Sioux Falls, South Dakota, November 1st 1945. I know that's kind of early but we got a lot of points in the Air Force.

N: Did you have a disability rating?

S: Discharged November 1st. That was 17 days before my 21st birthday. Eve-

ry kid should have a four-engine bomber to play with.

N: Do you have any opinions about our nation's military status or its policies?

S: Militarily it seems to be doing rather well right now. I think we're probably riding some kind of a crest due to the previous administration's efforts in bringing the cold war to an end.

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

S: No, other than through my work with the Veterans of Foreign Wars who do go up to this Veterans' Administration Hospital at Madison occasionally and doing things up there for the guys that are hospitalized.

N: What is your opinion of the Veterans' Administration if you have had any contact with them?

S: Like I say, I haven't any ... the people I've seen up at the hospital are very fine but I have no occasion to take advantage of their services, fortunately.

N: Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your military life?

S: They weren't really supporting me. I was getting sergeant's pay.

N: Morally, I meant..

S: Morally, okay. (Laughter). They were very supportive for that matter.

N: Over the subsequent years, what has this support meant to you?

S: I appreciated it at the time and do what I can to return the favor whenever possible, although it hasn't been directly possible because there haven't been other people in that situation. I appreciated and let them know this.

N: Okay.

(This is the end of the interview.)