

ELMER HOOPER

Air Force Crew Member
On B17 — 100 BG

Transcribed by Lorraine Lightcap
For Midway Village & Museum Center
6799 Guilford Road
Rockford, Illinois 61107
Phone 815 397 9112

Elmer Hooper

Hello: Today is January 24, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village & Museum Center which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village and I am talking to Elmer F. Hooper who lives at 1507 Kay Avenue, Rockford, Illinois. Mr. Hooper served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in this war.

NELSON: Mr. Hooper, would you please start by introducing yourself. Please give us your full name and place and date of birth?

HOOPER: My name is Elmer F. Hooper. I was born in Eldora, Iowa, on July 12, 1924.

NELSON: Would you like to—we would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

HOOPER: My father was Elmer F. Hooper, Sr. My mother was Alice Louise Hooper.

NELSON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

HOOPER: No. I am the only child.

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

HOOPER: I had an uncle that was retired from the United States Navy and during the war he was the commander of Mare(?) Island in the army. He retired as a Lieutenant Commander.

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

HOOPER: I was a high school student. Life was all fun and games. I was worried about basketball, football, band and girls and having a good time being a teenager.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. If so, where were you and what were you doing at the time?

HOOPER: I heard about it over the radio. I don't remember where I was or what I was doing. That's all I can remember.

NELSON: What was your reaction and response of those around you?

HOOPER: I really didn't quite understand what was going on. I was kind of mad about the whole thing of the sneak attack. But due to the age it really didn't sink in what was happening at the time until later.

NELSON: So you hadn't any opinion on war in Europe and Asia?

HOOPER: No, I didn't know.

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

HOOPER: No, I don't.

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

HOOPER: To a small degree, on what I would read in the newspapers, I knew about Britain being in it and the troubles they were having over there. But due to the young age,

it wasn't really sinking in or that I was really concerned about it.

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

HOOPER: I volunteered for the Air Force. I was always interested in airplanes. I made model airplanes as a high school student and had flown with some of my friends that had light aircraft at the time and there was a B17 bomber base at Sioux City, Iowa. They used to fly over my hometown, which was about sixty miles east of Sioux City. They fascinated me so much that I decided that I wanted to go in the Air Corp and fly. I wanted to be in one of those big bombers. That's when I became interested in the Air Corp, watching them fly over.

NELSON: Okay. Well, I think you answered the next question so I'll go to the basic training. When and where were you inducted?

HOOPER: I enlisted in Peoria, Illinois, in December of '42. I wasn't called up until, I think it was February of '43. They sent me to Santa Ana. First of all, they sent me to Fresno, California, for Air Force basic and from Fresno I went to Santa Ana because I enlisted in the Cadets.

NELSON: How old were you at the time?

HOOPER: Eighteen.

NELSON: Where did you take your basic training?

HOOPER: Fresno, California.

NELSON: What were you trained to do?

HOOPER: Just basic training. Learning how to drill, chain of command and this type of stuff, prior to going into cadet training.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

HOOPER: Well, some of it I thought was kind of stupid. Some of it I thought was kind of harsh. Some of it I could understand so that's about all I remember of that.

NELSON: Did anything special happen there?

HOOPER: No, nothing really special happened. The only really thing I can remember about basic was they gave us a canteen and a mess kit, sent us out to a gravel pile and we had to scrub it out with sand and put sand in the canteen and shake it all up. We used to sit out there for an hour or so scrubbing them "Cotton pickin'" mess kits and canteens so we could use them. That's about all I can remember of basic. I thought it was kind of stupid.

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

HOOPER: Well, in the course of Cadet, I went to —They sent me to Tempe, Arizona for four months of college. They called it CTD, College Training Detachment, to improve my skills to be an officer, I guess. We took English, mathematics, physics, and a lot of physical education (P.E.). After four months of college in Tempe, Arizona, went back to Santa Ana, California, and took up Cadet training, radio, navigation, military bearing, discipline, discipline, discipline. You got gigs for not having belt buckles shined, for not having buttons buttoned and Lord only a number of other things. Then you had to walk your tour, which was a form of discipline to condition you to, I guess, for

the battle what you were going to face to come up.

NELSON: Did you ever lose your passes?

HOOPER: Yes, sir. Yes, I walked a tour of duty due to demerits on weekends to walk off the demerits. Didn't get too many trips into town because they didn't allow us very many in those days but when we did get into town we had a good time at the Hollywood Palladium and all the sights around Hollywood.

NELSON: Did you have any associations with civilians?

HOOPER: Oh, yeah. Girls. Girls. Later on as I moved to another base, I had more relations with civilians than I did in Santa Ana. I want to digress for a minute. When I was in Tempe I met a—I was going with a girl in the college there. We couldn't talk to the girls during the day so we'd slip notes to the girls on the chow line to have our girlfriends meet us in the evenings and weekends. I was going with a girl I remember who had a sister who lived in London. Her sister was married and had a baby and later on in my career I wound up in England and I went to see this girl's sister and I visited them several times frequently in London. That was one civilian acquaintance that I made through a girlfriend.

NELSON: What was your military unit?

HOOPER: The Eighth. United States Army Force in the beginning and later on...

NELSON: What group were you with?

HOOPER: Eighth Air Force.

NELSON: In what group? Do you remember the group number?

HOOPER: Oh yes. Bloody Hundreds. The Bloody 100th Station 139 Four Abotts, England, and 351st Squadron.

NELSON: Okay. Good. What were your assigned duties?

HOOPER: I was a tail gunner. I had to protect the rear.

NELSON: If you there were any transfers to other units, please give us the details.

HOOPER: I never transferred to any other unit. When I left after my training in California I went overseas. I stayed in the Hundreds.

NELSON: Okay. This is the participation in the conflict. Where did you go after completing your basic training?

HOOPER: Where did I go?

NELSON: In your combat area.

HOOPER: Combat area. We landed ... We flew a new B17 over from Lincoln, Nebraska, the whole crew and we landed in Valley, Wales. They took the aircraft from us at Valley, Wales, and went on to an assignment center in Stone, England. From Stone we were assigned what bomb group, and Squadron we were going to be in and that's the only bases or outfits that I was ever in outside the 100th which being assigned from Stone, England.

NELSON: What did you think of our nations war efforts up to this point?

HOOPER: I thought they were great. We were turning out in great quantities of war materials. We had a good morale. The civilian population was behind us and I think we were doing real great.

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

HOOPER: First combat zone. First mission for a flyer was to Merseburg, Germany.

NELSON: Oh, God.

HOOPER: Merseburg was an oil refinery station field, synthetic oil. Merseburg to an Air Force man was a death trap. And the first mission I went to Merseburg was recalled. We didn't make it. We didn't get credit for the mission and the next day they sent us back to Merseburg and it is a rough target for any Air Force man.

NELSON: What they're asking is casualties, if you were involved with people who had become casualties and how did they occur and how were they treated?

HOOPER: Oh, we were lucky. We never had any casualties on our aircraft. There were nine men on the aircraft and nobody was ever wounded. We had plenty of battle damage. I have seen battle damage in my tail rudder was astronomical and other places in the aircraft. Luckily nobody was ever injured on our aircraft.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

HOOPER: You bet it did. I got scared. I got sometimes depressed. The old saying is "There's no atheists in foxholes" and I believe that to be very true. I've seen a few times when I thought they was going to have to put a gun at my back and march me out to that airplane to get me back in it to go again.

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

HOOPER: Well, I thought it was a just war. I thought we were justified in what they were fighting for. I thought it was sometimes a cruel war in terms of civilian population. The civilians in both England and Germany suffered considerably. This at times bothered me. But we had a job to do so we just went ahead and done it and put those things out of your mind.

NELSON: Did you write any letters home and did you receive many letters or packages. If so, how often, what type of things did you receive in these packets?

HOOPER: Oh, yes, I wrote letters very frequently. I had a girlfriend. I was engaged to when I left. I received letters from her almost daily. I wrote an average probably of three or four letters a week to her. My parents wrote me letters. I received letters from other people I knew in my hometown to boost my morale. Received packages cookies, candy, marshmallows, fudge. The sweets, the things we couldn't get in England was what we requested. I can remember a strange incident. At least I thought was strange. My volunteer gunner liked anchovies and he was always getting anchovies from his folks.

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

HOOPER: Yes. Being in the Air Force and always coming back to a permanent base and never moving around, we didn't have to worry about our mail getting lost. We had regular and prompt mail delivery of packages and V-mail.

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

HOOPER: Yes, we had nine men on a crew. Your life depended on those friends and you had to work as a team and you were close to them. We weren't as close to the officers because they were in their own clique but the enlisted men on the crew, we all went out together. We all run around together, went on pass together. We were quite close because we depended on one another and we had to.

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

HOOPER: Yes. My bombardier is in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I talk to him occasionally on the phone. He has come by my house. I was in close contact with my engineer, the top turret gunner, until he died. Most of my crew is deceased. I think out of nine, there is four of us left. One, I don't know where my copilot is. The bombardier is in Minneapolis. Pilot is in Nevada and I'm here. So that's the four of us.

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

HOOPER: I read through army publications, the magazine Stars and Stripes and newspapers about the interment of the Japanese in California, sent them to Arizona. I thought at the time it was the thing to do but then I was far away from home and I really never thought too much about it after you learned about it.

NELSON: What was your highlight occurrence of your combat experience?

HOOPER: I guess I — highlight of what?

NELSON: Well, say experience of your combat experience. What was your top experience that you can remember

HOOPER: That's kind of—I don't know whether you should tell these kind of stories or not. It goes into history. I'll give it to you anyhow. The last Friday night of the month the Sergeant's Club had free beer. After every mission we got a double shot of whiskey. We used to take turns drinking other crew members whiskey. After a mission you could wind up, conceivably with 5 double shots of whiskey. It happened to be my turn to have the rest of the crew members double shots so I drank 5 double shots and didn't go to the mess hall for supper. I'd been on oxygen for 8 or 9 hours. I went to the Sergeant's Club and started drinking beer and I got bombed — Snorkeled. out. They quit selling beer at 11 o'clock at night so I closed the Sergeants' Club up, went to my barracks. I was pretty well bombed and went to bed. They woke me up at 1 o'clock in the morning to go on a mission. I had had about 2 or 3 hours of sleep and I was still drunk. How I got to the aircraft and put my guns in it, I still don't remember. I did eat some fancy powdered eggs for breakfast, which I don't remember. Got up over Germany at 25,000 feet or so on oxygen and I got sick. I had to take my oxygen mask off and throw up. Well, knowing there is no air up there, you're on oxygen and it's pretty rough. So I throw up in a tin can,— a fuse can. It would freeze because it was about 30 below zero. I'd open the window on the side of the aircraft, bang it on the side of the ship to knock the ice out and then I'd bring it inside and I'd fill it up again. Well, I did this 3 times. The third time I got the dry heaves as we call it and I'm sucking the oxygen and there is not oxygen because it's coming out of my mask and I'd got my mask off. How I kept from not passing out and killing myself that I'll never know. When I finished the mis-

sion, the whole German army could have jumped me and I don't think I'd ever seen a one of them. I was out in the back of that aircraft, in that tail, and I really wasn't doing my job protecting the rest of the fellows because I was too sick. I never done that again. I will never do that again. And that is one of the highlights of my experience in the Air Force.

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

HOOPER: Well, we didn't do much for Thanksgiving. The base gave us a good feed on Thanksgiving. We stayed around the air base. We had packages from home for Thanksgiving. Little special extra things and we would have some ale that we could bring to the barracks and we'd kind of party around in the barracks. Christmas—they had a Christmas party for the British children — give them goodies and they would have us sing Christmas carols. We would have a Christmas tree in the Red Cross Club. So we kind of celebrated the Christmas with the British children on the base. So actually as far as having a big party by ourselves, we didn't have. We shared everything with everybody.

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

HOOPER: I came back to the United States in August. I believe it was of 1945.

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

HOOPER: Ah, I might say I came home on a Kaiser liberty ship with air crew and ground crew members. And why I — It took us about 10 days, I think, to get over here. I

was on board ship when the Japanese capitulated after the two atomic bombs had been dropped. So the war—all wars was over then. We had a big celebration on board ship. I remember we landed in Boston, got on a train. I went to Santa Anna, California.

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

HOOPER: I achieved Staff Sergeant, had the European Victory medal. I had the European Theater medal. I had the Air Medal with 5 oak leaf clusters.

NELSON: How many campaigns were you in?

HOOPER: Just one, the European.

NELSON: Then we returned to civilian. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

HOOPER: Fine. Fine.

NELSON: Were there any things you would do differently if you had to do them again?

HOOPER: (Hesitation). No I don't believe so.

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

HOOPER: I guess really it was getting up every morning, get in that aircraft and go again. I think that was the hardest thing I did. I didn't mind leaving home. I was young and eager to experience but, man, getting back in the aircraft every morning, was really rough.

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

HOOPER: Just surviving! Surviving was the big thing. I'd seen too many of them die.

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

HOOPER: VE Day I was on the air base in England. It came over the radio. It came by word of mouth, by papers and the — It just spread like wild fire. You heard it and everybody was happy. We didn't have to go back out and finish our tour. If we had more mission to do we didn't have to worry about death any more at that particular time.

NELSON: How about VJ Day?

HOOPER: VJ Day was like I said. I was on a boat coming home and we figured was coming home from B-17 training to go into transition to B-29s and hit the Pacific Theatre. We were all just happy as a lark when we find out Japan had quit; because we wouldn't have to go to B-29s and do any more bombing.

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

HOOPER: After reading of the atrocities that the Japanese military inflicted upon the servicemen and the civilians, I felt no remorse about it. I'm glad they did.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed after the last 50 years. If so, how?

HOOPER: No, it hasn't changed. I wouldn't do it now but at the time when you look back in history. It was the thing to do

so I wouldn't say that I would be sorry about it but I would now. I wouldn't want to drop one now.

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

HOOPER: I was discharged in Santa Anna, California, in September of 1945.

NELSON: Which month did you say?

HOOPER: I think it was around September, 1945.

NELSON: Okay. Did you have any disability rating or pension.

HOOPER: Nope.

NELSON: Do you have any opinions or feelings about the nation's military status or its policies?

HOOPER: No. I think — I don't think that they should be sending troops into some countries. Like, for instance, Haiti. I don't think they should send them to Somali. We should stay out of Bosnia. I can't see losing American lives for the good of some politician or ruler trying to rule his people and it's a struggle for power and I don't believe that we should be involved in their struggle for power. We should try and talk peace; we should and negotiate but I don't believe we should send American troops over there to lose their lives for those people.

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

HOOPER: No, sir, I don't.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us about your family's support during your military life?

HOOPER: Well, my family support was great. Like I said, I was engaged. My girlfriend was — got a “Dear John” letters. My mother was very supportive. My father was kind of a silent support but I didn’t have any brothers or sisters to support me but other than that, it was great.

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

HOOPER: Well, it has been a support that is hard to really express. They appreciated what we done. They understood our problems. We were welcomed home. In context to the Vietnam fiasco, the support was absolutely fantastic. It made you feel good about what you’d done and you were proud of what you’d done. Sometimes now days that’s not true.

NELSON: This is a question that I would like to ask. Elmer, what can you tell me about the 100th Bomb Group in England?

HOOPER: 100th Bomb Group came up with moniker of the “Bloody Hundred”. This was kind of tacked on to the outfit as a “hard luck” outfit because of so many casualties we had. The reason why they claimed we had a high amount of aircraft losses was because we flew such loose formations. In talking with other Air Force members from other groups, they would say “The Bloody 100th” is next to us. We don’t have to worry because the German aircraft box formation of aircraft is to join together to have a more concentrated fire from machine guns that are mounted in your aircraft. If you fly a loose formation the enemy fighters are able to fly in and out and it makes an aircraft much easier to shoot down. Because we were guilty of such lousy, sloppy formation plans we lost a lot of aircraft and became the “Bloody 100th”. Later that was rectified through leaders, officers of the group in

tightening up the flying formation. We still maintained the moniker of “The Bloody 100th”. The 100th did fly 1906 missions. We were about the 2nd, I think, group in England with the most casualties. We was.... The 100th flew only the famous raid to Schweinfurt and Regensburg. They flew on the shuttle missions to Russia.

NELSON: Can you describe to me one of your missions that you remember vividly?

HOOPER: Oh, yes. On April 7th, 1944, we went to Buchen, Germany. We had a bomb load of 6 one thousand RBXs, high explosives and the flying time was 8 hours. We attacked at an oil storage from 15,000 feet. Cloud cover but we were bombing by radar. Attacked at 1300 by ME2109s that lasted for 28 minutes and during this battle I saw one ME109 ram into the wing of a B17 in C Squadron. I saw it out my window and the fort went down in flames. A little while later another fighter rammed the tail of a B17. It broke off the horizontal stabilizer plus bad damage to the vertical fin. But believe it or not the ship came back okay. The takeoff time was at 9 o’clock. We landed at 1700. “Bombs Away” was at 1327. Flack, or anti-aircraft fire was light and accurate. The temperature at that altitude at the time was minus 25 below zero. Our group got... shot down 6 aircraft and it was the 106th mission on my old Skipper Two the name of my aircraft. I’d like to describe one more mission to you that sticks out as quite memorable. This one was on December 31, 1944. We went to Hamburg, Germany. The bomb load was twenty 250-pound general-purpose bombs. Time of the mission was 8 hours. The target was an oil plant. Today day was a big show. The target was visual and flack was heavy and accurate. After leaving target we were hit by 30 to 40 fighters mostly FW190s. I was damned scared but I did my job. Claimed one FW, picked up two holes

in the ship quitting time. We lost 12 ships today and some buddies, 26,000 feet, 46 below zero. Our group got 23 of the 26 enemy aircraft destroyed. I got one destroyed on our crew and 4 damaged on our crew. That was quite a day seeing 12 or your friends go down beside you.

(This was the end of the tape).