

Charles Nelson

European Theater
World War II

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We are at Midway Village, Rockford, Illinois. Midway Village is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens who participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II.

Charles Nelson:[My father's name] was Otto William Nelson and my mother's name was Elvira Nelson. They were farmers out in the Midwest, Cook County, Nebraska. During the depression and through all of the dust storms, they finally gave up and moved to Chicago back in 1937.

Robert Nelson: Where did they come from?

CN: Both of them came from Sweden.

RN: In what year?

CN: My dad came a little bit before - I would say about in 1916 or 1917. I don't remember exactly when my mother came here.

RN: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

CN: I have one sister. Her name is Annie.

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

CN: They were both hard working immigrants that tried to make a decent living and that against terrific odds most of their lives. But they always tried to make a good home for their children.

RN: What was life like for you before the war? Specifically back then in 1941? Where were you working and what were you doing?

CN: Well, I got out of high school in 1940. It was very difficult to get work in Chicago at that time, so I was able to find a job at the Kraft food Company where I worked for a year. As the war progressed I was able to get a job in a defense plant. I was able to ___?___.

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

CN: I read a lot of articles about it in newspapers and on the news radio about what was happening in Europe and Asia. I knew that eventually I probably would have to serve.

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

CN: On that Sunday morning I was going over to a friend of mine who lived about a half block away. I was going down the alley and he came out of the back door and hollered at me that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

RN: What was your reaction and response at the time?

CN: Well, I was very surprised and immediately thought we'd get into it. We would just have to wait and see what happens.

RN: Did you have any feelings or had you developed any opinions as to what was taking place in Europe and Asia at that time?

CN: I think most of the young people at that time were very concerned as to what was happening in Asia and I think most of us probably realized we'd have to get involved in it right away.

RN: Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of Hitler's aggression in Europe?

CN: I think most of us were knowledgeable about what happened probably through the news reels and the movies and the radio.

RN: Do you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions at the time?

CN: Well, I thought the guy was crazy.

RN: What events led to your entry into military service?

CN: Well, like I said before, I was working at this company in Chicago and then I got a 1A Classification which meant that I would have to go down and get involved with the draft. My company gave me 180 days deferment because I was working on something essential for the war effort. After that was over I had a deferment for 120 days. In the last deferment I got 60 days. Then I decided that since I had 60 days, it would be a good time to get married. So my fiancée, Marcella, and I decided to get married rather than being apart. Then, I can't remember the reason, I got an extension and after that a 6 months deferment because I was considered valuable where I was working.

RN: What kind of defense plant was this?

CN: It was a screw company. They were making all kinds of spools and bolts for different customers that were probably using this in the defense effort.

RN: When and where were you inducted?

CN: In Chicago, oh, I'd say it was in the middle of December of 1942.

RN: What can you remember about the event of being inducted?

CN: Well, at that time they were looking for an awful lot of military people. I had always been very interested in the military and such things so I volunteered to get into the Air force. I took my test then and passed. I was given a physical and passed. That was normally 64 of the grade with the tests we had to take. So then I was supposed to report to (I think I was supposed to report at 8 o'clock to the staff sergeant. For some reason or other I was a little late and he asked me what time I was supposed to be there. I said around 8 o'clock. He said we don't mean around 8 o'clock, we mean 8 o'clock; therefore you're out of the Air Force and into the Infantry. So I was really disappointed about that. Then I had to report to Fort Sheridan in January 17th of 1944. I reported to a room that was giving tests for the military

so I thought I'd have to take these tests again. The captain asked if anyone had taken this test before so I raised my hand and said that I had. He said, "How come you're here again"? I told him my story and asked for the name of the person that did this to me. I told him and he called the guy up and chewed him out right there. Then he said "Don't worry. You're in the Air Force".

RN: Well, what did you think of your training-your basic training?

CN: It was awesome for a young civilian just out of high school. Hadn't been out of high school too long. But you make it and do it.

RN: Did anything special happen to you when you were there?

CN: No. the only thing I can remember was that we went down to Miami Beach. We stayed in real nice hotels rather than bivouac, and, like I say, it was in January and 93-94 - beautiful climate down there.

RN: You were stationed at Fort Sheridan and taking leave in Miami?

CN: No, we were just at Fort Sheridan a few days before they put us on a train for an overnight ride and we went to Miami Beach. The next morning we arrived at Miami Beach and that's where we started basic training.

RN: What fort was at Miami Beach?

CN: I was right down on the beach where the hotels were. The government was taking over most of the hotels. We had different flights occupying the different hotels. That's where we stayed.

RN: What was your military unit?

CN: The military unit was the Army Air Force.

RN: Had you been assigned to any duties at this point?

CN: No, I hadn't. There was just a lot of instructions. How to handle a rifle and that sort of thing, and military . . .

RN: No flying at this point?

CN: No, no flying at this point. From Miami we were sent to Kingman, Arizona. From there we got into flying and also got into shooting at targets and aircraft recognition which pertained to being a gunner. We also had to be very familiar with the different caliber of machine guns. In fact, we had to know that so well that we had to detail strip it and then blindfolded put it all back together again without looking at it.

RN: What is detail stripping?

CN: Well, it was all the parts in the machine. I can't remember how many parts there were. Then after that when it's all taken apart, you'd have to pick up each piece and put it back together again while blindfolded.

RN: How long were you in Kingman?

CN: I think around Kingman maybe to about the middle of the summer. Then we were sent back to Florida to airplanes and that's where we met our crew and where we officially met all the pilots we were to fly with. We were with air force pilots that had military gunnery training and had to fly in formation and to get familiar with each other's jobs. That was a lot of training. Then we went overseas.

RN: When did you go overseas?

CN: I went overseas in November of 1944. We flew to Georgia and then went down to Savannah to pick up army airplanes (B17 bombers). Then flew on to Newfoundland and then went up. The weather was real bad so we stayed at the Newfoundland base for a month. While we're at Newfoundland we had to guard the air force planes every night. We had to sleep on the plane and guard it. We continued to do this and this went on for 30 days, guarding it. We finally got decent weather to go, so 12 planes and the crew started toward England. Eleven of us landed there and I don't know what

happened to the 12th airplane. He might have had to turn around and go back.

RN: What did you do once you arrived in England?

CN: We actually landed in Shetland, Scotland. We were only there, I think, around 24 hours. Then we went down to the mess hall, didn't like to see the ___?___. Then they put us on a train and sent us down to Norwich, England. From there we went to our base in a little town named ___?___. Our base was amongst those three little towns.

RN: What did you think of the country's war efforts up to this point?

CN: I was very impressed. There were mistakes but considered that this was the first time in this war, we had to start from scratch. By the time I got involved, I thought they were thoroughly organized and we had ___?___ fighter pilot as an instructor. The most ironic part of it is, he was a German. He flew for the German Air Force in World War I AT-17 Cessna Bobcat. While we were at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, on the 23rd of May, 1944, that I received my wings, silver wings.

CN: I think when we first got involved in it, we didn't realize that Russia was going to be involved with us. As we got into more missions, we realized that it would take a lot of ___?___ to stay alive. I think we resolved the fact that, if possible, we wouldn't get hit. But we always had hope and a lot of courage to cheer us.

RN: What was it like in the airplane?

CN: Inside the airplane, it's like being in an airplane except that we didn't have any extra space. It was--it had no heat in there except electric heat. Each individual was assigned a heated suit, heated shoes, heated gloves. Of course, we had clothing on top of that. The temperatures we put up with was down as low as 55° below zero so if you lost a glove you'd get frost bite immediately, so we had to be cautious about the. Inside the airplane on the windows a lot of frost would form so you had to continually

scrape the frost off the window. In fact, also oxygen--we had to have a lot of frozen water that would form on the mouth at the mark that would look like ___?___. So there were a lot of things that could happen in an airplane that we hadn't ever counted on. Without oxygen you didn't--if you didn't have any oxygen, you could get depressed by the lack of it.

RN: Did you use the guns on every mission?

CN: No. There were some missions that there were times we didn't see any fighters. They might have been in the area but they didn't necessarily attack our ship. But we were always waiting for them.

RN: How long did a mission last?

CN: The mission would last anywhere from 5 hours to 8 hours long.

RN: Did you write many letters home?

CN: I tried to write every day. It depended on how much time. Some days we would fly like 2 days straight. If you got up at 2 in the morning and you came down and had breakfast. Then you would have to go to a briefing and then you'd have to go to the airplane and to out on a mission. By that time it would be 6 or 7 in the morning. When you got back in the afternoon there were many things you would have to do. Sometimes you didn't have time to write but I did try to write often. I used to receive an awful lot of letters from friends, relatives. Got letters from my sister and wife.

RN: Were letters censored?

CN: Yes, the letters were all censored and the letters you wrote were censored by ___?___.

RN: How about the letters you received?

CN: I don't remember them being censored.

RN: Did you get packages also?

CN: Oh yes. We used to get packages from my mother all the time. In fact sometimes she sent

me a bottle of wine in an unbreakable bottle. Sometimes I'd pass the bottle around and by the time it got back to me, it was empty. (laughter)

RN: Did most of the men write and received letters?

CN: I didn't know anybody that didn't. I know in my barracks they all received letters and packages from home.

RN: How many people lived in you barracks?

CN: We had two crews that lived there. In my barracks we had Lt. ___?___ and Lt. ___?___. So the entire crew stayed together there.

RN: So the entire crew stayed together there?

CN: No, the officers had their own place. Officers stayed there and enlisted men stayed in their place.

RN: I see. Did you form close bonds of friendship with some of your comrades?

CN: I think so. We still get together. There are things we can do (have a reunion. So yah, there's interest.

RN: Prior to the end of the war were you aware of any civilians in concentration camps?

CN: I don't know. I don't think I did.

RN: What other highlights or occurrences do you remember about your war experiences?

CN: We were talking about the conditions in the airplane. Of course, we're flying up around 27,000 in the air formation probably ___?___ airplanes. The conditions are very bad and we had a 2nd Lt. who ___?___ what we called ___?___, and we had oxygen checks about every 10 minutes. He was making sure we are getting the required oxygen which we had to have to exist. On one oxygen check I didn't respond because one of my electric heater gloves had caught on fire. Well, we called them fires. In the attempt to put the fire out, I had disengaged my extension and I also disengaged my oxygen

which I wasn't aware of. Of course, as soon as I didn't respond then the Lt. Came back to see what was the problem. He went back to get an oxygen bottle and plugged in the oxygen but by that time I was just kind of passing out. You could exist about 5 minutes up there without oxygen. So I was very lucky I was able to pull through that.

RN: Did you ever get hit by a missile?

CN: Well, every time you fly they'd shoot flack at you. You'd always end up with a lot of holes in the airplane but fortunately we were never really hit. But we had a lot of close calls. Lot of collision close calls because you'd fly in such tight formation that you could get into flack. A lot of airplanes were going up and down and sideways so a lot of planes just hit each other and both would go down. We had a lot of close calls but we never really touched another airplane. But we were close to them.

RN: Did you see airplanes collide?

CN: Oh yes. I saw several airplanes collide. I remember one time, I can't remember the target, but there was an airplane on our right wing and it was a strike. I think that a friend of mine was in that airplane. He got hit by fighters ___?___ and I was shooting at him but I don't think he was shooting at our ship. He shot at the one on the right side and that blew up like fireworks. That's hard to see.

RN: How many missions did you go on?

CN: I went on 32 missions. I had one in France and 31 in Germany.

RN: What was Christmas and Thanksgiving like when you were overseas?

CN: Well, Christmas and Thanksgiving were the most important part of our-- because you finally got a good meal. It was a special meal so a lot of goodies came along with it. But the Christmas I can remember was served on the 22nd, 23rd, 24th and 25th so when we got back on the 25th that was a real good turkey dinner. When Christmas was gone all we got was hot dogs. So

we were very happy about that. When we were in Newfoundland ___?___ and myself, we cut down two Christmas trees and put them in the plane. We took these trees back to England with us and set them up outside the orderly room and then ___?___. So we came out and we were all given gifts.

RN: In Newfoundland?

CN: No, this was in England.

RN: When and how did you hear about the end of the war in Europe?

CN: In April of 1945. In fact, we were in South Hampton aboard a ship. I can't remember. I think we were about to go back to the United States. The war ended in Europe as we were on board the ship about 2 days before we set sail. So we took off and I think we left on the 10th of May. We arrived at ___?___ New York. While I was aboard I volunteered to do K. P. duty. I worked on kitchen duty every day so I wouldn't have to go in line to eat.

RN: How did you get along with the people with whom you had the greatest contact?

CN: Well, we got along real good. In fact the other crews in other planes, we all got along. We all knew we had to depend on each other so there was a lot of cooperation.

RN: Would you do anything different with regards to your time in the military?

CN: Well, you think about that a lot. Sometimes I thought if I had done something different maybe I wouldn't be here. I often thought of that because I always wanted to fly and I thought if I pushed myself harder I could probably make the ___?___. But maybe I wouldn't be around, who knows?

RN: Didn't you volunteer to get to the Asian theater after?

CN: Yes, I did.

RN: What happened?

CN: Well, I could come up with ___?___ a little sharp ___?___ and it was a 2 man crew. So I thought I could get use to flying one. I went to my colonel and he recommended that since my missions in Europe maybe I could fly with them. Except that since the war ended it didn't happen.

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

CN: I think the most difficult thing I had to do was I was just married. I hadn't been married more than 6 months and I had to leave my wife and then go into the service. Also when ___?___ was born I wasn't able to come home. So what I did when they wouldn't let me go home, I bought milk shakes and cigars for everybody I knew.

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

CN: We were in South Hampton on that ship, that liberty ship. We could hear the celebration outside but we couldn't go ashore to take part in the celebration.

RN: Did you notice any change in the German defense as the end of the war drew near?

CN: Yah, they were throwing up everything they rucks and went over there, my co-pilot and I so we got to see the entire camp. We saw the ovens. We saw hundreds and hundreds of deal of gratitude.

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

CN: VE day was, we were expect__?__ . . .

RN: [What was your] opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japan and civilians in August of 1945?

CN: I think it saved a lot of American lives. I think what I would have done differently, maybe the they did this, I don't know but I would certainly have dropped all kinds of pamphlets a week or so before they decided to bomb a

certain city, warning the people to get out (that I'm going to destroy the city. Then if they didn't go out, I wouldn't feel as badly about it when they bombed that particular town.

RN: Has you feeling changed about the atomic bomb in the last fifty years?

CN: Maybe it hasn't changed that much.

RN: When were you discharged?

CN: I was discharged October of 1945.

RN: What was you rank?

CN: I was a staff sergeant.

RN: What happened to your airplane?

CN: I don't know. We left it over there. I don't know what happened to it.

RN: What was the name of the airplane?

CN: ___?___ (girl's name) the noble effort.

RN: Why did they call it that?

CN: Lt. Hall, Charlie Hall, his fiancée's name was ___?___ so that was the name that he chose for it. It was a model Fighter so that was . . .

RN: Can we ask you how many missions you were on?

CN: Yes. Thirty-three, the pilot flew 35. I didn't mention the fact that we went on flack ___?___ leave which was after 5 to 25 missions. You had to get away for a while so they sent us down to South Hampton, Brownsfield, England. So for a week or ten days our whole crew was down there except the co-pilot, Lt. Brown, and so he flew another crew. While he was on a mission in Czechoslovakia he got hit by an enemy fighter ME 210, a new jet the Germans were coming out with. He got hit and I think he lost ___?___ and went down in Czechoslovakia and was killed. The story that we heard from people around here said the fighter plane flew into the

back of a B-17 and the whole crew went down in flames.

RN: Did you see many jets in the war?

CN: They were in the area but I don't remember seeing any jets. But they told us if we saw a jet to start shooting at them at 150 yard rather than 100 yards or at 1000 yards for a regular ___?___.

RN: What kinds of medals and decorations?

CN: I had the good conduct medal first, then I had the American theater medal. Also I could have applied for a medal for being at ___?___. I don't know what they called it. I never put in for it. I had the air medal, had the five missions I took. You had to request the air medal. I think that's about what I had.

RN: Do you have a disability rating or a military pension?

CN: No, I don't. I did have a service connected disability but I don't see them too much. Takes too much time.

RN: Do you have any contact with the Veteran's Administration?

CN: Yes, I do. I go up on a regular basis two times each year. See a doctor up there.

RN: What is your opinion of the Veterans' Administration?

CN: I think they're terrific. They have been good to me.

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

CN: Very well. I got all the letters and all the packages that they sent. I had their support.

(End of the tape)