

Robert [Brooks] Stringer

Transcribed by Lorraine Lightcap
For Midway Village and Museum Center
9766 Guilford Road
Rockford, Illinois 61107
Phone 815 397 9112

Robert Stringer

My name is Charles Nelson and I am a volunteer at the Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois 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 Museum Center interviewing Bob Stringer. Mr. Stringer served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war. Bob, would you please start by introducing yourself to us and please give us your full name and place and date of birth. We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

STRINGER: My name is Robert [Brooks] Stringer. My parents' names are Gordon Stringer and [Meta F.] Stringer.

NELSON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

STRINGER: Yes. I had 2 brothers. One died as a result of the South Pacific and the other is living down in Arizona.

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

STRINGER: My dad was a high school teacher in language and did coaching.

NELSON: This is about entering the military. What was life like for you before the war and specifically during 1941?

STRINGER: I was in College of Engineering, University of Illinois going to school.

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

STRINGER: Very few. I was busy at college. (Chuckle).

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

STRINGER: Sharing the noon meal on Sunday at Sigma Chi Fraternity and it came through on the radio at that particular time.

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

STRINGER: We figured that this was a call we were going to be inducted. Two of my friends working with me were officers in the ROTC in the horse drawn artillery. They went home immediately and started writing letters to get into the Air Force instead.

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

STRINGER: We didn't like to see Germany doing what it was doing but we didn't know very much about it. Didn't hear much about it.

NELSON: How about Asia?

STRINGER: Didn't know anything about Asia.

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

STRINGER: No, I don't.

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

STRINGER: Very little.

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

STRINGER: I volunteered.

NELSON: Was your response to entering military service influenced by family and friends' attitudes towards war, the threats of national security or any other consideration?

STRINGER: I entered because I wanted to have a place of my choice instead of drafted rather than end up doing something I didn't want to do.

NELSON: Do you have any special memories of this event when you first were inducted into the service?

STRINGER: Yes, I was inducted in Chicago. We were put on a train and for 3 days we rode around the country getting to Shepherd Field, Texas. When we got there they decided they didn't have uniforms so ___?___ another week while they tried to find uniforms for us.

NELSON: How old were you?

STRINGER: That's a good question.

NELSON: Probably 21 or 22?

STRINGER: 21 I suppose in 19 ...

NELSON: What happened when you were inducted besides no uniforms?

STRINGER: We went to Shepherd Field for basic training. I already had a couple of

years of ROTC and I think I could have taught most of the drill sergeants how to do it.

NELSON: Where did you take your basic military training?

STRINGER: Shepherd Field, Texas. Worst place in the world. The only place you could stand with water to your waist and have dust blow in your eyes.

NELSON: What were you trained to do?

STRINGER: As far as I know, absolutely nothing. We moved from there to San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center for evaluation.

NELSON: I think I've asked the next question. What did you think of the training?

STRINGER: The training was all right if you never had any before. If you had some idea of what you were trying to do it would be fine.

NELSON: Did anything special happen there?

STRINGER: Absolutely nothing. We used to have drill most all day and every once in a while the Sergeant would say "Well, we got to have a measles inspection" so we'd march through this empty barracks and pull up our shirt and walk through. It took about a half hour. I never did see anybody looking at us. Took time anyhow.

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

STRINGER: I spent 2 summers at Fort Sheridan in Citizen Military Training, 1939 and 1940. I learned more there than I learned in the regular army by far.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

STRINGER: I was offered a pass into Shepherd Field to the town if I learned the General Orders. That was so long ago I just gave up the pass. Nothing in there I wanted to see.

NELSON: Okay. What was your military unit?

STRINGER: Well.

NELSON: This is still in the States.

STRINGER: Oh, I have no idea. We were just recruits.

NELSON: At that time it was the Army Air Corps, I suppose?

STRINGER: I don't think. I guess, maybe we were. Yeah, I didn't get assigned until after I finished San Antonio.

NELSON: I'm going to go right into the conflict. Where did you go after completing your basic military training?

STRINGER: San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center to be evaluated to see what attributes I had and what they needed.

NELSON: If you were not sent overseas immediately following basic training, when did you finally leave the United States?

STRINGER: After San Antonio they sent us to East Central State Teachers' College for some additional education. It so happened there, I did too well on the test so I didn't stay but a month.

NELSON: When you were sent overseas how did you get there?

STRINGER: That was a good deal. We got on a Liberty Ship, Newport News, Virginia, and took us 28 days to go over to Oran, North Africa. We were there for about a month. We don't know why. We were just sitting around waiting. Then we were taken across the Mediterranean to Naples in a luxury liner called Merundo Castle which was a super tourist ship. My crew was taken over in a cattle boat. I mean cattle boat. They took the cattle off and put our people on it. The toilets were holes in the floor and that was it.

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

STRINGER: I thought it was very slow and poorly organized. They didn't seem to know where they were going. Just an example: In 1940 I was up at Fort Sheridan and they took us on the red(?) range and they showed us a grand rifle. Consider that as something wonderful. We looked at it and a couple of us got to "shoot it." In addition to that they pulled .037 millimeter gun, out there on rubber tires yet and they could tow it behind a truck. Wasn't that wonderful? That's as far advanced as we were in 1940.

NELSON: If you did not immediately enter combat zone, where did you go before entering combat.

STRINGER: To Oran, North Africa to cool our heels until they'd get us over to Naples and then from there to ___?___ on our way to the combat zone.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience of entering your first combat zone or mission

STRINGER: Our first mission, I flew with another copilot so he helped out to get started right. I remember it was quite uneventful.

We flew up and dropped our bombs then and back home.

NELSON: Did you consider that a milk run?

STRINGER: No, they shot at us.

NELSON: Can you list for us in order of occurrence any subsequent combat experiences in which you were involved?

STRINGER: Altogether I flew 30 missions. Some of them were a little rougher than others. A few mishaps but we generally got out pretty well.

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

STRINGER: We had no casualties on our aircraft. We had holes put in it. We had people pass out because they didn't carry their oxygen right. Nobody was worse for wear.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

STRINGER: Gee, I don't know. I think we could see toward the end, the missions were getting to be different because there just weren't the places to bomb as we started with.

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

STRINGER: We thought we were winning. We could see progress.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

STRINGER: Yes. Got a few letters, too.

NELSON: Yes. How often?

STRINGER: Oh, probably once a week.

NELSON: Did you receive packets through the mail?

STRINGER: Yes, we had to do that in order to get something to eat. We had lousy, I mean lousy man that ran the Officers' Mess. We couldn't eat what he put out. Then they came in one day and said. "Well, no meat today. Somebody dropped off on the overpass and unloaded the truck before it got there." The man was just incompetent, that's all. We'd have pancakes in the morning and we'd feel the pancakes. They were cold. We would throw them up against the wall. If you can see a whole squadron eating there you can't imagine all the pancakes laying around that place. He didn't seem to mind at all. He always wanted you to have a tie on before you came to eat. Real, shouldn't say the word.

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

STRINGER: Yes. Most of the time we wrote to get food that you could hang on the back of the door and eat it when you wanted it. We just didn't get any food worth eating.

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

STRINGER: Yeah. The crew I saw all 13 last summer. We met together. Some of the other people I've never heard from. I'd like to but I don't know where they are and they don't either.

NELSON: And you remain in contact with World War companions?

STRINGER: With the crew, yes. Some of them I can't find.

NELSON: Did you ever have to help retrieve a wounded buddy in a field of combat?

STRINGER: No, but I was asked to identify some bodies in a plane we crashed and some were friends of mine.

NELSON: You weren't involved in any of these concentration camps in Germany or Poland or anything like that?

STRINGER: We dropped bombs on some.

NELSON: But you never actually ...

STRINGER: No, I wasn't a prisoner of war.

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

STRINGER: I think the most highlight mission I flew, we were going somewhere up in southern Germany and about 2/3s of the way there, the right gear on the airplane came down. It wouldn't go back up. With a full bomb load you can't fly with one gear down. So we asked for some fighter escort to get back home. They said, "Forget it. Go." I got down low and found a target of opportunity and dropped a load of bombs on. They were surprised. Then we flew back to a place called Sanski Most which was a designated landing field in Hungary that we could have landed on and been safe. Rather than land there it looked like a cornfield to me so I pulled through once to see what it looked like and made the turn around and

told the co-pilot to drop the gear. He did. The left gear came down and the right gear went up! (Laughter) Try them both up. So he pulled them up and they both came up. He took off over the Adriatic. We got back about 2 hours after the mission got back, about 100 feet off the water all the way across the Adriatic.

NELSON: But how did you land?

STRINGER: In our regular ...

NELSON: Your wheels came down okay?

STRINGER: Yes. Soon as we got down low enough there was ice in the hydraulic fluid. It melted and then they worked all right. About 2 days later that same plane cracked up on the end of the runway because they hit the brakes and nothing there. We only had a 5000 foot runway. He sheared off into the countryside.

NELSON: You didn't have the same plane each time?

STRINGER: No, never did. They found out that the planes were a lot more reliable than the crews. Somebody was always sick or couldn't fly and the planes flew every day.

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

STRINGER: Well, the first Thanksgiving we were on the luxury liner, the New(?) Castle and that's an English boat. They didn't celebrate Thanksgiving. Forget it. We had kippered herring and that was it. I grabbed the waiter to get some bread so we'd get something to eat.

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

STRINGER: Well that was interesting. We went to Bali to wait for a plane to fly back. The crew waited with me. They gave me a plane and I took it up and flew it. It was a junk. You wouldn't trim up. It wouldn't fly correctly. So I took it back and said "That's it. I don't want it." They said, "Well, you won't get home for a long while." I said, "That's all right, I'll get home in one piece."

NELSON: Were these B-24s?

STRINGER: Yes. I don't want to fly that thing that you got. Forget it. He gave me all kinds of admonishments that I would be in trouble. I didn't fly this long to get killed on the way home. They looked at you like you were some kind of a nut. It was only 2 days later they gave me another plane. It was a beautiful plane. It was a lead plane. It had radar on it and everything. We flew that down to Marrakesh. First of all we got in a sand storm. We flew up to 10,000 feet and the sand was so white it looked like snow. It was like grit in your teeth. I was worried the engines were going to be eaten up with that sand in there. You couldn't go any higher, we didn't have oxygen masks with us. We just figured 10,000 was high enough. When I dropped down on the water, we were in the Mediterranean, flew right up to the Rock of Gibraltar. I didn't get too close. There was one plane on each wing. They said, "Turn around and go the other way." So I went out and around the coast of Africa and went over to Casablanca. We heard about it and thought that's a good place to land. So we landed there. They wanted to know, "What do you want?" Well, we just landed here. What else can we do? They said, "We'll put gas in and you go." So in about 20 minutes we gassed up and flew to Marrakesh where we were supposed to go to begin with. We

spent about 3 days in Marrakesh then we took off for the Azores, flew over an overcast— The whole complete day. Never saw water or anything and you're supposed to find this little island out there. I had an excellent navigator and he found it right on the money. We stayed there for a couple days until it cleared up and then we flew to Gander, Newfoundland. At Gander it was in July but it was cold. We had steam heat on. Then we flew from there down to a field in Massachusetts around Boston.

NELSON: Can you think of the name of it?

STRINGER: With the overcast weather I was flying around the hills down there. You couldn't get up into the clouds and I thought this is for the birds. I'm not going to do this. I flew over a real nice looking airfield, a commercial airfield. So we tried to contact them but they couldn't talk to us. So we used ___?___ which is green lights using code. They answered back, "Come on land." So we pulled around and landed. It was the Hartford, Connecticut Municipal Airport in Hartford, Connecticut. Some airliners had to go around while we landed. We started getting out of the plane. Some guy rushes out there and says, "Oh, you can't get out." "The hell we can't." "Oh yeah, you can't, you haven't been through customs yet." ___?___ They were gone. The gals that were stewardesses came out and shook hands with us. We went in a little place to eat there and ordered all the hamburgers and things that they had. We didn't have any money. All we had was this Italian script which was worthless. Then they called the man at Miles Standish. I said "Colonel "Look I got your airplane down here. What will I do with it?" I said, "It's assigned to me and I'm not going to be charged for it." He said, "That's all right. You leave it there on the field and we'll send a truck for you." They sent a semi and we piled all our gear in there and they

took us up to the base. Then we were allowed to call home.

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

STRINGER: I was a 1st Lieutenant and I had air medal with about 3 clusters and had European ...

NELSON: Did you get the Distinguished Service Cross?

STRINGER: No, didn't do anything spectacular.

NELSON: Now we're going to turn to civilian life. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

STRINGER: We got along real fine. Two of the crew were Jewish, one that was a Mexican and the rest were just normal people. We got along fine.

NELSON: Were there things that you would do differently if you could do them once again?

STRINGER: Yes. I think I would spend more time with the crew and teach them what I want them to know. But at the time we were so busy doing what we had to do, we had no time for anything else.

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

STRINGER: Being assigned to a mission. You never knew—you'd go up the night before and look. But then you'd find out what plane you got. That wasn't worth knowing. So we never did. We just waited. In the morning about 4 o'clock, you hear

this ___?___ running around the tents and the houses we built and he'd stop at your place and you know he's going to get one of your crew. The 4 of us lived together. And after he did that then you'd go back to sleep and sleep. Otherwise you waited until the jeep came around and picked you up.

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

STRINGER: Getting back in one piece.

NELSON: Lot of guys say completing their missions.

STRINGER: I didn't finish. I had 5 more to go. But they finished the war before they let me finish.

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

STRINGER: Well, our radio. Somehow somebody had a radio and told us it was done. The mission was called off, as I remember. We didn't need to go on the mission. We celebrated by shooting rockets up ___?___. The Colonel came down and said, I know it's a lot of fun but you've got to stop." The flares were falling on tents and burning them up.

NELSON: How did you learn about VJ Day? What was your reaction to it?

STRINGER: I was home as a civilian on VJ Day. I had been mustered out. I had all the points and they didn't need me any more.

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

STRINGER: I think it should have been done. It shortened the war.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed in the last 50 years and if so, how?

STRINGER: No. Not at all.

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

STRINGER: June, 1945, because it was in July when the bomb was dropped I was already a civilian.

NELSON: Do you have any disability rating or pension?

STRINGER: No.

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

STRINGER: The nation's military status now is not what it should be. Our great president is trying to save all the money he can and put into his liberal programs where they give away to get votes. One of these days we're going have to get in a conflict somewhere and he's going to look around behind him and there ain't going to be anybody there to send.

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

STRINGER: No.

NELSON: You've gone to a Veterans' Administration Hospital or anything?

STRINGER: No.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your

military life?

STRINGER: Well ...

NELSON: And what did this support mean to you after these years?

STRINGER: Wasn't very much. My wife-to-be but girlfriend at the time use to send me letters and clip out the funny papers.

NELSON: I know over the subsequent years, what has that support meant to you?

STRINGER: Made all the difference ___?__.

NELSON: That's a real fine interview. Is there anything else you would like to add to this, Bob?

STRINGER: I think the training I got in San Antonio, Aviation Cadet Center, was one of the finest things he'd ever done. They had to have God, I don't know how many pilots, copilots and bombardiers—he had no way of knowing who could do it or how to get it. We spent over a month in testing and the first time during that the testing decided whether you had the qualifications. It worked very well. I would like to have been a navigator but they said “No, you're going to be a pilot.” I think that was a real milestone in placing people where they belong. The army is always telling “You're going to be a cook,” then give you a job someplace else. They were notorious in not knowing what to do with people. In this case the Air Force did an excellent job.

NELSON: Thank you very much.

STRINGER: You're welcome.