

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
www.heritageed.com
Moorhead, MN

Wallace Pfeiffer
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

2014

LJ: Could you state your name?

WP: Wallace Pfeiffer

LJ: And what branch of the service were you in?

WP: Ace Air Force.

LJ: And what war?

WP: World War II.

LJ: Okay. Can you tell me where were you born, Wally?

WP: In [indecipherable] North Dakota.

LJ: And what did your parents do?

WP: My dad was a station agent in the Sioux Line Railroad; and my mother, she never did work that I ever knew of.

LJ: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WP: I had two brothers, no sisters, and they are both gone now. I'm the only one that's hanging around.

LJ: Where did you go to school?

WP: Egeland, North Dakota.

LJ: Did you graduate high school there?

WP: Yes, I did.

LJ: And what did you do after high school?

WP: I was drafted right after high school for World War II. I was in the service for just about three years.

LJ: So when you got word that you were drafted, where did you go for your basic training?

WP: Well, I was drafted just a few days after Japan took after us on the Hawaiian Islands. And so, I guess I was sent overseas then and was sent over to, Okinawa. Then I was sent into, well I don't remember which country, but I was sent into where I was going to be stationed as a ground troop in Okinawa. I didn't like that worth a darn; and so, I was out one day and I got a day's leave. And I went to our commander and I said that I demand to be transferred to the Air Force or someplace more than what this here. And they did, they transferred me. That was very, very unusual. But I proved to them that I really wanted to be in the communications for the Air Force.

Mrs. Pfeiffer: He already had the communications certificate.

WP: That's what I did then.

LJ: Great.

WP: Yeah, and that was just very interesting.

LJ: So then where did they send you?

WP: Well, I went over to England first and flew in a B-17 as a communications person. I had 33 missions over Germany.

LJ: What was that like?

WP: Well, some weren't too bad but there was some very bad. In fact, we crashed landed in Holland; and we couldn't go any further. We couldn't get back to our base in England. Our pilot said, "It's impossible." He said, "If I can keep it high enough in the air to get across our lines then we'll just come in on our belly," and.

LJ: That must have been very scary?

WP: Oh it was. We knew we was going to save ourselves unless the airplane blew up or something more.

LJ: Now what kind of training did you have to go through before you went on the B-17.

WP: Well, not too much. I had to train in the radio end of it. And we took some training in the United States on a B-17 and that's where we got all our training straight from the airplane. We weren't a full crew then, but we were sent to Oklahoma where we got together, all the radio operators in one place and the engineers and the gunners and the pilot and the copilot. And we took off to each line for our crew, and that worked out pretty good. Yeah.

LJ: So how many would be on a crew?

WP: Well, when we first started there were ten on that crew. But towards the end of the war, it was between six and eight with six most of the time.

We crashed landed that airplane on a Canadian fighter base. And they were just all upset with us and everything else, 'cause they were using it everyday. Well the big B-17 tore up all of their runway and everything so they couldn't use that. So they weren't happy with us, I'll tell you. That's some of the things that happened that you wouldn't expect to happen.

LJ: So how did you get back to the base in England?

WP: There was a little camp that they set up and it was usually used by people that were coming back and had to land at this Canadian base. And then we would go there and stay there until we got back to England. They sent a plane over for us and I suppose that took five or six weeks before they got one over there. But anyhow that's how we got back.

LJ: So, you spent the five-six weeks then right in England?

WP: Yeah and we sat there at that little camp for about five weeks before they finally got a plane over.

LJ: What was the morale like at that point, knowing that it would take five-six weeks to return?

WP: Oh, I think it was pretty good.

LJ: You'd been through the worst.

WP: They furnished us beer any time we wanted it. They knew we weren't going to be doing any flying or anything for a while. But anyhow, they finally got us back to England. And we made a few more trips - over to Berlin most of the time; and then the war was over there [European Theater]. They sent us to New York and from New York, they sent us to a base in Wisconsin. But then, the war was over there [Japanese Theater], too. So they gave us each a furlough to go home for three weeks or whatever it was.

LJ: What was that like, getting to go home? How long had it been since you went home?

WP: Oh, it was very good. And I tell you there's more stories told and people asking questions to answer.

LJ: How long had it been since you were drafted until you got to go home again? Was it several years?

WP: Yeah, I got to go home for I don't know a couple of weeks or something. Because then we had our orders where we was supposed to go to England and we were flying a plane over. The weather got terrible and they called all the planes back to Canada. For some reason, there was about 8 or 10 of us that didn't get the message, so we landed in Iceland. And I know we stayed there until the weather cleared up a little bit.

When it did clear up then we took off for England. And we got to –I forget what the airfield was – but that's where they sent us and from then on we flew out of England to different places in Germany that we bombed and that's about it.

LJ: What came next for you?

WP: Well, I know what came next was when the war was over in Europe or Germany. The first thing we did after it was declared over, the pilot, copilot, navigation and communications which was myself, we took all ground personnel – I think we made three or four trips - over some of the bombed cities and different places that we took them to. The plane was full of people in the gun compartments and everything else. And I thought that was the most dangerous thing in the world. That they want to take all the ground personnel on a few trips to show them what we did.

LJ: Can you tell me about some of the people that really stand out that you served with?

WP: Well, our crew for instance, there was 10 of us in the crew. But then there was really toward the end it was cut down because they didn't need that many. We formed the crew in Oklahoma, I think it was; and then we went to Bangor, Maine. And we took off from there over to Canada and landed there. And then the weather finally straightened out, half way decent, we took off for England via Green – Iceland. And the weather closed in on us, so we landed at Iceland. We stayed there for three or four days as the weather was so bad. Then we got over there, and we landed in England, but we didn't know where we were supposed to go or anything else. Well, they finally sent us where we were supposed to be.

LJ: Where did you end up?

WP: In Kimbolton, England and from there we flew out bombing in Germany. I guess that's all I can say about that. We were shot up sometimes pretty bad.

LJ: How many missions did you do?

WP: Thirty-three.

LJ: What was it like going on that last mission?

WP: Well, I think we all appreciated that it was going to be the end. But we also knew that we were going to be sent to Japan if the war wasn't over there. Well, it happened to be that war was over, while we was the on the boat from England back to New York to Wisconsin.

LJ: So you were on the ship for how many days?

WP: Oh, I would say close to two weeks.

LJ: What was life like on that ship for two weeks?

WP: Well, not too bad.

Mrs. Pfeiffer: Lots of beer, Wally?

WP: Quite a bit. Worked out real well.

LJ: How did you pass the time?

WP: With another bottle of beer in my hand.

LJ: So the morale was good no doubt.

WP: Well, there wasn't much you could do to pass the time. But we went up on the upper deck and hung over the rail and just watched the ocean go by and stuff like that. Otherwise, there wasn't much that could be done.

LJ: So once you got docked in New York what happened next for you?

WP: Well, that's when they sent us to the base in England that we was going fly out of to do some bombing over there. The last we seen of Hitler, he is laying on the ground dead. And we figured it was one our bombs that took care of him.

LJ: That had to have been a great feeling?

WP: Oh, absolutely. Real happy about it.

LJ: Yeah.

WP: But we did some things too that we shouldn't have done? When we dumped all our bombs on our way back to England. There was no more targets – well the bomb bay was full of bombs - we'd fly over some of these small farmhouses and drop a bomb on them. There was nothing left of them. That was kind of mean, I thought, but it wasn't. They were our enemies, so.

LJ: So where was this happening where you dropped on the farmhouses?

WP: In Germany.

LJ: So once you came back home from the war, did you stay on with the military?

WP: No, just until they wanted to discharge me.

LJ: And when did that happen?

WP: Well, let's see. I don't know if I can figure out the date – it must have been in – well when was the war over there in Germany. It wasn't long after that.

LJ: Forty-six?

WP: I was going to say that was probably when it was. It wasn't long after we were back. They sent us to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. And then, we was supposed to go from there to the West Coast and from there over to Japan to give them a little trouble.

LJ: So when did you get to Japan?

WP: Well, when to Japan? They quit you know when we were on the boat from England over to the United States.

LJ: So did you still need to have to go then?

WP: That was halfway over.

LJ: Okay.

WP: And so that we didn't get any further than that.

LJ: Okay so you didn't have to go to Japan?

WP: No, we didn't have to go there.

LJ: Good for you.

WP: Then they gave us all a couple, three weeks leave to go home. And we hadn't been home for years you might say.

LJ: That had to have been a wonderful, wonderful time.

WP: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LJ: So what did you do with your life after you completed your mission and were released?

WP: Well, I went to work for the railroad as a telegrapher.

LJ: And what does a telegrapher do?

WP: A telegrapher did all the communications. I was stationed in Detroit Lakes. I took all the communications there for people from Detroit Lakes up to Thief River or something like that, and then, well how was it?

They sent us to Wisconsin again. But it turned out that they didn't need us over with the Japanese so we was sent back home. I was home for three weeks, and I had a good time with old friends. I lived in a farming community and a lot of the young fellows got out on account of farming. But for us they didn't look at our...

LJ: So you said you spent how many years with the railroad?

WP: Forty-two.

LJ: Now did you ever have any reunions with any of the military personnel you served with?

WP: No.

LJ: Did you ever keep in contact with any special people?

WP: Well, not too many because the airplane crews, which was ten most of the time, kind of kept to themselves. The crews didn't intermingle or anything.

We were going over to England, we flew into Canada and then we flew over to Iceland. We landed there. The weather was [indecipherable]; it was getting bad. So we just stayed there. And I suppose it was for four or five days. The weather cleared up and we took off and we made it to England. But we didn't know where we were supposed to go in England; so we went up, and we found an airbase, landed there and then a couple of days later they told us where we was going.

LJ: So now I understand that the pilot that you worked with is the only one in your crew that is still ...?

WP: The two of us as far as we know.

Mrs. Pfeiffer: They're the only two that communicate.

WP: At least once a year we get together on the phone. Yeah, so we have a . . .

LJ: And where does he live?

WP: He lives out in Massachusetts.

LJ: That's wonderful. All these years and you still talk to each other once a year.

WP: Oh, yeah, we still, yeah.

LJ: And what's the pilot's name.

WP: Edwards.

LJ: Edwards.

WP: Al Edwards.

LJ: And did you get together otherwise, you know?

WP: No, we never have.

LJ: Just on the phone?

WP: We never have. I shouldn't say we haven't. He came up here once and stayed in a motel in Bemidji. And oh I got to visit with him quite a bit then 'cause he stayed up there for two or three days.

LJ: That's wonderful. So Wally, how would you liked to be remembered?

WP: Well, I don't know. I've told so many people about my experiences already that I don't know. Anyway you want to.

LJ: Well, you've got your military life and your career after the military and your family. Can you elaborate on anything like that?

WP: Yeah. That's very true. I wrote this one you know. Margo, that's our daughter and she did the typing on it. I wrote it all by hand.

LJ: It's a wonderful keepsake.

WP: Here's our four officers and the copilot, bombardier, the pilot, and the navigator, so.

LJ: That's a great picture.

WP: Yeah. It is, a very good picture.

LJ: Wonderful keepsake.

WP: Don't know if there's any more in here or not.

LJ: Nice to have your story all written up like that. Very nice.

WP: Here's the enlisted men; myself and the engineer. He was the gunner, ball-turret gunner, the tail gunner.

LJ: That's a beautiful picture. Fine handsome young men and what's this picture here?

WP: Yeah. This is a picture of the planes flying through the clouds.

LJ: Beautiful.

WP: On the way home to England if it got too bad sometimes the German fighters followed us right out there. And so we would get into the clouds and kind of hide in there. What would you call it? It wasn't the best thing you could do. Because you went into some space that you . . .

LJ: And what plane is this, the B-17?

WP: That's the B-17. I can't recall which one it is.

LJ: Beautiful pictures.

Mrs. Pfeiffer: Up there in the hallway is the B-17 from the front with [indecipherable].

WP: Here's all the pictures I got initialed.

Mrs. Pfeiffer: Tell her your remembrances of your experiences with the railroad.

LJ: Very nice, so can I ask you one more time, Wally, how would you like to be remembered?

WP: Well, I suppose the best way would be that I was a lucky SOB that made it through. I don't know really what to say about that.

LJ: Thank you, Wally.