

Interview with Mr. Art Stiebe

Veteran – World War II

Date of Interview: February 18, 2004

Place of Interview: Kinsley Methodist Church, Kinsley, Kansas 67547

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Narrator: Today is Wednesday, February 18, 2004, and this is an interview with Art Stiebe at the Kinsley Methodist Church in Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Stiebe is 85 years old, born July 7, 1919. Our names are Gentri Huslig and Cody Graybeal and we will be the interviewers. Mr. Stiebe served in World War II in the Army Air Force. His highest rank was technical sergeant.

Narrator: What did you like about the war?

Stiebe: Well, not too much really. Of course I realized that it was something that had to be done. The threat of Hitler's Germany almost subdued Great Britain, but they subdued France, took over, and it became an occupied country. They came real close to doing that to Great Britain. If Great Britain had fallen, there would have been terrible consequences. Germany had such a powerful, well-organized Army and Air Force. They also were working on breaking the atom. In their Research Center in Peenemünde, Germany they were doing a lot of very extensive work and fortunately they didn't break the atom during that critical time. If they would have and if they had the atomic bomb like we ended up using, it would have been a real tough deal on the rest of Europe. My group bombed Peenemünde more than once. We slowed up their progress of splitting the atom and becoming a nuclear power.

Narrator: What were your emotions while going through the war?

Stiebe: My emotions . . . well, they would fluctuate from calmness of ordinary life at your base; then you were loaded in a truck to go to briefing early in the morning, like say 3 or 4 o'clock. They roused you out of bed before you got to sleep (laugh) to eat a fast breakfast, go to briefing, and look at the map and see where the target is (pointing his finger as if he were looking at a map) for that day.

If the target is way into Germany, one of the known really tough targets like all of the oil refineries or ball bearing plants that were extremely well defended, you would expect very heavy antiaircraft fire, and you would also expect the Luftwaffe coming up. The German fighter planes would give you real fits. It went from looking at that one point today to going through all that rigmarole of putting the guns in the airplanes and setting up frequencies. They would always change frequencies on the radio between missions. They would never have the same one, so the Germans couldn't break down and intercept your messages. Of course, the messages were also encoded, but they were pretty clever at decoding some of this coded stuff so you couldn't be too careful. Then you had the long drag of getting into formation after take off, flying across the waters, often across the North Sea.

We didn't go directly into the country unless the target was there, for instance, Berlin. I went to Berlin on my third mission, got indoctrinated real fast. You went a long drag across the North Sea and then changed course and going south, then southeast into the target. Then their antiaircraft fire would start; you would see all those little black bursts out there. That naturally wasn't exactly pleasant. Sometimes you, well everybody said, I never heard anybody who participated in combat mission say they didn't have moments of fear. When you were afraid, you learned to be able to still do your job even though you had great trepidations of about what it looked like. When you arrived at the I.P. (initial point) and that I.P. turned into the 15 to 20 minute bombing course, you would look out there and see all that big black puffs and you would say, "Jesus, we have to fly through that?" But then you gritted your teeth and started doing what you had to do.

Narrator: Tell us about the main plants that the Germans protected?

Stiebe: The main plants? Oil mostly. The oil refineries were very well protected. They had a synthetic oil plant at Meersburg, Germany, which was close to Leipzig. They had an oil refinery there and also had one at Merkwiller, which we hit one time; it is just a little place that I can't even find on my German map. It's just in Germany, close to the border of France. Ball Bearings were another thing, and then there were some bridges that we hit and railroad yards. We bombed Munich, Germany three days in a row, hitting the marshalling yards in Munich. Of course, Munich is way south, deep into Germany. And antiaircraft fire was terrible. We hit tank factories, bridges behind German lines, a Luftwaffe base, oil refineries. (Stiebe is looking at a paper that he got while in WWII that told all of the places he went and what they hit. He laughs.) We were trying to limit the amount of fuel that the Luftwaffe and the German Tank Corps had because all of the German vehicles have to use fuel, gas. And that was the main goal, to limit, to try to bring the German Luftwaffe and their entire military to a halt. It had its great effect. Certainly the ground troops appreciated what we were trying to do. I never felt like I wanted to trade positions with the ground troops on the front line. I thought I had a better deal.

Narrator: How did you keep in touch with your family during this time?

Stiebe: I wrote them a letter occasionally. We weren't allowed to say much. The outgoing mail was censored to make sure we didn't say something sensitive to the enemy mind.

Narrator: Tell us about the food you had.

Stiebe: For the flying personnel, the Air Force food was quite good. We got some pretty good meals. We ate at a mess hall at our base where we were stationed. Our base was close to a town called Podington, England. Our food was quite good. Living conditions weren't all that bad. We lived in little Quonset huts with little round metal tops, which held about 12-14 men. Each individual had his own bunk, cot. We slept on straw mattresses that were provided by the British. Certainly our living conditions for air personnel were way, way superior to what the people on the ground, the infantry or other ground forces had. They had it pretty tough, particularly when they moved. They advanced fast and hardly had stuff to keep up with them. The Air Force had a lot better living conditions.

Narrator: What were the differences and how did the nations help one another?

Stiebe: Well, Great Britain helped a lot; they provided the place for the bases. The Royal Air Force had something like 50-some odd airfields in England they loaned the 8th Air Force. Here's a map to give you some idea—ones with a star were the Royal Air Force. It was either a bomber base or a fighter base that supported the bombers, were scattered all over.

Narrator: What did you do for entertainment?

Stiebe: Well, we had a Red Cross center where you could go play ping pong, pool, be served ale, mild and bitter . . . relax a little between missions . . . played poker in the huts. There was always a poker game somewhere. We got a 48-hour pass for a little slack time. If the weather was bad, you couldn't fly and you would get your 48-hour pass; our crew generally went to the same pace. We went to Sheffield some, London a time or two, went to Manchester, would do a little sightseeing and try to relax.

Narrator: What travel did you do?

Stiebe: To travel, yeah, you didn't have much time. Your 48-hour pass isn't very long. What we had to do was catch a train, roughly an hour ride. We were then on foot unless we got a cab. We still got a chance to see life. I was able to make one trip to London, got to see Big Ben, the Tower of London, most of the sites. There wasn't a relax time like you normally would be thinking about. London was being attack by buzz bombs at the time. You could hear them approaching. The first buzz bombers had a little engine in them, were timed to run out of fuel when they got to London. That's not the most accurate thing in the world, but it was surprising how often they hit the city of London. London was a big city then; it's a larger city now. When the V2s were developed by the Germans, they were a regular rocket and were quite accurate. You didn't know where they would hit; you didn't have much warning.

Narrator: How did the British stay safe during the bombing?

Stiebe: How did the British stay safe? They really didn't. A lot of them spent a lot of time in what they called the tube, or the underground transportation system, the subway. Practically living in the subway, a lot of them had lost their homes. Buzz bombs had no place else to go. It was fairly warm down there in the subways, not exactly cozy. I saw whole families living there. The British people went through really difficult times during World War II. Of course, so did the French, but the French were taken over and surrendered to Germany. Then they didn't have any choice at all.

Narrator: What was your salary?

Stiebe: What did you get paid? I got \$80 some odd a month. Then we got flight pay when we were on active flying duty. That was about 50 percent of regular, so I was probably getting about \$120 a month. The enlisted pay of a private was \$50 a month. When you became a private first class it went up to \$55. The air crew was either buck sergeants, three-stripe sergeants or staff or tech sergeants, which was right under master sergeant, so my pay was a little bit better. There were two tech sergeants on the crew. The engineer was a tech sergeant, and the radio operator was a tech. The rest of them, the gunners, were staff sergeants. Of course we had four commissioned officers on the crew: a pilot, a co-pilot, navigator, and bombardier. They were commissioned officers.

Generally the pilot was a first lieutenant, gradually made, before you completed the tour. Our pilot became a captain. The others became first lieutenants. One of our officers, our co-pilot became a prisoner of war. He had about five missions to go and the group planned a special mission leading the 8th Air Force, the first group, over the target. And they selected him to be the observer in the tail position of the lead airplane. So, he got credit for the mission of course. A tour of duty originally was 25 but was 30 when I arrived over there, and they whooped it up another 5 so it was 35. I think he was about 32 missions. He was flying in the tail position as an observer and they lost two engines during a bomb run. They had trouble controlling the airplane. They had the high brass flying the lead plane. The group commander was in command of the plane, and he was a real experienced pilot. They ended up losing altitude and they suddenly went into a spin. They had icing on the wings down at the lower altitude and went into a spin, so the pilot gave the bail-out signal. At this bail-out signal that things were not good, he and the two in the nose, the bombardier and the navigator, bailed out. The pilot of the plane nursed it back to England and landed. The co-pilot ended up doing about 8-9 months of POW time in Stalag Luft. Wasn't pleasant I'm sure.

Narrator: What were the prison camps like?

Stiebe: I never was in a prison camp; I guess they could have treated the guys different. The Germans treated the prisoners better than the Japanese, but they had limited rations, and it was a tough existence.

Narrator: Tell us about any humorous or unusual events.

Stiebe: Oh, off hand I can't say I recall anything that I call humorous. I recall several unusual events. (Laughs) We tried to inject as much humor as we could when you were just living day to day. In the barracks we had a little hut, a bicycle. I didn't learn to ride a bicycle until I was sent to England. When I was a kid I lived out here in the country; and I didn't have a bicycle. I guess it was humorous when I first started trying to ride that bicycle. It was harder to learn than when you're young; I fell off several times. Of course we had our ball turret gunner who had flown a partial tour in medium bombers. He went to town a lot, rode his bicycle to Welling borrow, Podington. He got kind of buzzed up with drinking too much of one thing or another and the road back had this steep incline. He was coming back to the base; it had a kind of brick wall where the road turned real fast; and it was night. Visibility wasn't that good. He wasn't clicking too good, and he ended up hitting that wall pretty good, tried to brake at the last minute. He just crumpled that front wheel. We had a pretty good assortment of characters in that hut, you know a broad section of population at that time. We had guys from Texas, the East, New England area, the South. Pilot was from Montana; engineer was from Dayton, Ohio; our ball turret gunner who crumpled the front wheel was from Montana also. A guy from Oklahoma lived across the aisle from me. Inhabitants of the hut changed.

The mission, my 17th, went to an oil refinery at Markwiller, Germany; the group commander piloted the lead ship. After the bomb run he decided we ought to go over the target and take some more strike photos to get a better picture of the bomb strike. So we started to make the 360 degree turn. The fighter escorts the P-51's and they were starting to run out of fuel and thought they couldn't make that 360 so they took off for England. There we were without fighter escort. This being an oil target, an oil refinery; they had a lot of Luftwaffe there. Boy, just like that, we were attacked by these German fighters and we absorbed about 8 20mm shells that hit our airplane and our left wingman off our left wing. Well, that crew stayed in our hut too; they got shot down. When we got back there, only three people were in our little hut. That crew was gone and the rest of our gang our crew received wounds and were in the hospital, so things were a little lonely for a while. Two days later they moved in a new crew to replace the ones that got shot down.

The missions were easier when I went over. I got there just before the invasion. I didn't start actually flying combat missions until the 19th of June; the invasion was on the 6th of June. Then I flew a few what they call tactical missions, helping the troops, just before the breakout at St. Lo when they took off to go across Europe—the infantry and tanks. We did a whole bunch of bombing along the front edge of hit on the German lines. It was pretty tough down there I'm sure because it demoralized the German army temporarily. That gave the U.S. a chance to get the big offense started. Our tanks and infantry and artillery started moving across France and moving into Germany. After that we started hitting primarily what they called strategic targets which are railroad yards, oil refineries, factories, and major bridges that were defended pretty well with a lot of antiaircraft fire. The waist gunner had severe injuries to his leg and never flew again. The field gunner had small wounds, superficial wounds.

Narrator: What does the Purple Heart signify? What were your duties?

Stiebe: Purple Heart means wounded. The bombardier had severe facial wounds, took his teeth out from an antiaircraft shell. The ball turret gunner that day at Merkwiller had a direct hit, was sitting on some armor plate under the seat, received a small wound in his hip. I rode in there one day for about two hours; he said come down here and try this, you'll like it. After two hours no thank you . . . glad you're down here. And our engineer got a bad wound up here high in the leg.

Other duties I had was probably the chief first aid giver for the crew. The radio room had a nice plywood floor . . . about the only place in that B-17 that you could lay someone down and work on them. We had heavy flying clothes on; they were heated suits, still pretty heavy. And to get at a wound,

his blood's running down in his boot . . . so I had to take my knife out, slit it open. Yeah, he had blood running down; I had to treat that wound. I put a compressed bandage on it and sacrum powder. We couldn't communicate. The airplane made so much noise you had to be on intercom. It wasn't like working in a doctor's office, and I wasn't a doctor; but I did several of those first aids. Interesting.