

George Noorigian
Bombardier, Mercer=s Crew
703rd Squadron, 445th Bomb Group
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George Noorigian: See, he (Jack Mercer, the pilot) was up in the front. I was in the waist. Normally I would be in the nose with the navigator, but the B-24s are different. The B-17 had room up there, but the 24s were terrible for the bombardier. They had a nose turret, so you couldn=t see anything. You had to look down underneath. But when you flew on a mission, you didn=t have to worry about bombing yourself. The lead bombardier, just like the lead navigator, the lead pilot, you just followed them.

Aaron Elson: So when you saw the lead bomber drop its bombs, you would bomb?

George Noorigian: Yeah. Then you=d drop them, see. So what I did, instead of being up there in that hole, they said I could go into the turret in the front. But there wasn=t much room in there. And if I had to get out of there, forget about it. So I said, ALook, give me a waist position.@ So I went to the right waist. There was a right and a left. And I wanted a gun in case something came up. So I had a .50-caliber gun in the right waist position. That=s where I flew most of the missions. And according to Mercer, we were credited with seven planes. I was credited with one Focke-Wulf 190. And the co-pilot verified it. The co-pilot was on the right side, and this fellow was coming in from the right. They were coming in so close, they were coming in between us. No long-distance, they were right on top of you. In fact, I looked up, at the window, and I saw this FW-190, with the big swastika on it, and I could see the pilot, real clear. He was hunched over. And that day our squadron happened to be in the low position. There=s low and medium high and high. Usually you wanted to go into the high position because of anti-aircraft, but this day we were in the low position which was a good idea because the German

fighters came from up above. And they came down, they swooped down on the squadron, on the whole group. And the whole group, within less than ten minutes, 25 of us were shot down. There were planes blowing up. I saw engines go flying out of their holes. I saw parachutes. Parts of planes. It was just one hell of a mess. And we had our .50-caliber guns, we had I think eight of them, shooting like hell. This is above 20,000 feet. It was one hell of a mess. And we got one shot from a Messerschmitt that came in. He was on the left side. It wasn't on my side. He came in low, and the Messerschmitt had four 20-millimeter cannons. Four of them! Along the wing. And he gave us a shot there. One hit the tail, you know the double tails they have on the B-24? The one hit the tail and it made a mess out of the tail. The second one came in √ I was sitting when I was firing; there are no seats in the back, and we had boxes of what they call chaff. The chaff you distributed in certain positions over there, and what that did was knock out the radar. They would throw out bunches of it, and from the ground, especially when you had cloud cover, it would look like there=s a squadron of planes there. So we had the boxes of chaff and I sat on a box with my .50-caliber gun. So on shell hit the tail, and the second one came in on the side of the plane ∅ blew a hole I could put my head in it ∅ and it went into the box. It went into the box and blew up. But it blew in such a way that it blew it the other way. It=s a lucky thing I=m still here.

Aaron Elson: These 20-millimeter shells explode?

George Noorigian: Yeah, and what happened, one section of the plane in the back was all full of oxygen tanks, because we had to be on oxygen over 15,000 feet, and it blew out five or six tanks. Blew them out! Everything is white smoke. And the radio went out. You didn=t know what the hell was going on in the front. [I put my parachute on], because I didn=t want to be up in the air with a flak jacket with no chute, just taking a chance. You didn=t know whether you were gonna get out alive or not. But it blew out the oxygen tanks, and it made a hole on the side of the plane. The third shell came through the bomb bays, where the gasoline tanks are. It made a nice hole in one of the bomb bays and went into one of the gas tanks. It knocked out part of the hydraulic system. But it went into the tank and, since there was no fire, it made a big hole in the tank. Those are self-sealing tanks, but this hole was too big for it to seal and the 100-octane gas

was just going all over the plane. Hundred octane. Eight .50-caliber guns going. I tell you, I didn't know what the hell, I was ready to jump out of the goddamn thing. The plane was gonna blow up. And another one came in and it went into one of the engines. It hit the prop. And when we landed, you should have seen the mark that was on that prop. But that's what happened, on that volley of four 20-millimeter shells from that Messerschmitt. So I'm here by the grace of God.

Aaron Elson: So you took one volley of four 20-millimeter shells from an ME-109.

George Noorigian: Yeah. A Messerschmitt. It was Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs. The one I had was a Focke-Wulf. I saw the Focke-Wulf there. See, and this was Hermann Goering's squadron, Yellow-Nose Squadron. We were off course. We were supposed to bomb a tank facility down below in Kassel, and the lead navigator was slightly off course. We had this cloud cover, you couldn't see anything, and what happened was, we got away from our main group, which had fighter protection.

Aaron Elson: Did you know that you were off course?

George Noorigian: No, we didn't know. We wouldn't know it. Above the clouds at 22,000 feet, 22,000? We in the back of the plane didn't know where the hell we were.

Aaron Elson: You were dependent on the lead ship?

George Noorigian: The only thing I know, the lead bombardier dropped his bombs and we dropped ours. Where they dropped, I don't know. We didn't know where the hell we were. But the only thing I know, we were off by ourselves.

Aaron Elson: You could see that?

George Noorigian: Yeah. And then, they saw that on the ground. And boy, they came up

there, and they made one hell of a mess. Twenty-five out of 35 planes.

Aaron Elson: How could they see that on the ground if there was cloud cover?

George Noorigian: Well, they could; they probably had radar. You didn't have a hundred percent cloud cover. And they had the radar, they could see. You understand?

Aaron Elson: What was it like inside the plane? Was it windy?

George Noorigian: Windy? No.

Aaron Elson: From all the holes and everything?

George Noorigian: Well, yeah, the one window B I had a window on my side, a big one, and there was one on the other. We had to have that open, so we could see what the hell is going on.

Aaron Elson: And you were flying at what, almost two hundred miles an hour?

George Noorigian: The planes used to go approximately 180 miles an hour, 180, 185. They were faster than the B-17. I like the 17; it was more comfortable.

Aaron Elson: Did you fly in 17s too?

George Noorigian: I flew in 17s, but never on a mission. You had a beautiful view in the front; they didn't have a nose turret. And the 17s, you could knock out the engines and the damn thing was like a glider. But on the 24, they had what they called a Davis wing. It was a very narrow wing. That was for speed. We could go 15 or 20 miles an hour faster than the 17. But if you lost an engine, or two engines, you had a tough time keeping that plane up. You didn't have the floating power, see. That was the Davis wing.

Aaron Elson: You lost two engines coming back, didn't you?

George Noorigian: We had the one engine was bad, but we had the three engines as far as I know that were still all right.

Aaron Elson: What was that flight back like?

George Noorigian: Well, what happened after the fighter support came in B finally we got fighter support and then the Luftwaffe got the hell away. And the fighter support came in and they helped us. They flew with us. And we didn't know what the deal was, whether we=d have to dump the plane or not. But we had that on shell that went into the gas tank, and all that gas B hundred octane gasY

Aaron Elson: Could you smell it?

George Noorigian: Ohhh, sure! It was terrible. It was just leaking down into the bomb bay and we were in the back of it. And I say it=s a good thing nobody smoked. You know, there=s one thing about our plane B nobody smokes in the plane. I went on a mission B I had to take someone else=s place one time B and the guys are puffing a cigarette at altitude. In the back. I didn't say anything, but that=s a hell of a thing. They were on oxygen.

But Jesus, finally what happened, the co-pilot came and stuck something in the hole to try to seal it. That=s what he did. So after that, there were just two planes flying, where normally we=d have ten or twelve in our squadron. It was just the two of us. The lead plane, they never shot him down. We were next to it. So they told the lead plane we=re gonna stop at Manston, because we=ve had a lot of damage on the plane and we didn't know how much gas we have. At Manston, you could land a plane any way. The runways were just as wide as they were long. It was an emergency British base. Right beyond the White Cliffs of Dover. You know why they call it the White Cliffs of Dover?

Aaron Elson: No.

George Noorigian: All the pigeons roost on it. Nobody ever said that. That=s all pigeon crap on it.

Aaron Elson: I never knew that. Now, weren=t you afraid of slamming into those white cliffs?

George Noorigian: Well, we were high enough. We still had enough power.

Aaron Elson: And what did you think when you came in for that landing?

George Noorigian: Oh, well, we were all ready; we didn=t know what the hell was going to happen. Because they shot out the hydraulic system and we didn=t know how much brake we had. But they came in, and they just had enough brake to stop the plane. It stopped the plane. It came in, and boy, we watched the goddamn thing coming down. We were in the back, and it came in nice, and Y he did a nice job of it, coming in, Mercer. He and Pouliot, because you had to have two guys up there. Two of them. Not just one. It wasn=t just Mercer; he had to have Pouliot there. Because a lot of times when we used to come in for a landing, Pouliot would land the damn plane. But you had to have two. Mercer was good.

Aaron Elson: Did you have wheels?

George Noorigian: Yes. We came in on wheels. We didn=t bottom out. But they had to hand crank them down. They hand cranked them, and it worked. And I remember, finally we came in to the landing, and boy they had the fire department following us. They didn=t know what the hell was gonna happen. Finally it landed, and the plane stopped. Boy, I got out of that plane, it=s the first time I ever kissed the ground. Honest to Christ, just to be on the ground. It was the first time I got out of that plane and I kissed the ground. And you should have seen the mess! We had so many bullet holes, and that one hole on the side, and oh, Jesus, the tail was Yand

that was almost a new plane.

Aaron Elson: Really.

George Noorigian: See, normally people think that when you go over there in combat they issue you a new plane. You don't get a new plane until you fly about 16 or 17 missions. What they do, the old planes that were flying, you had to take one of the old planes. And a number of times in the beginning when we had the old plane, we had trouble with the plane; we had to come back. We never could complete the mission and we never got credit for it. But it wasn't until the 16th or 17th mission that we were assigned a plane. And then the plane that we were assigned, they had a problem with the engines, so they gave us another plane, a new plane. And what a mess, I'm telling you. It's too bad in a way we couldn't go back to our base. If we had just gone back to our base, I wanted them to see the plane the way it was. They never did see it at the base. And you know what? Jimmy Stewart was the squadron commander there. He was the commander of the 703rd.

It's the 445th Bomb Group, and the 703rd Squadron. There was a 703rd and a 702nd, 700th and 701st, there were four squadrons in a bomb group. Jimmy Stewart was connected to the 445th. And I used to talk to him; every once in a while they would have a dance in the officers' club, and he would always be there, and the Red Cross would get a bunch of girls from town, and they'd get a GI orchestra to come in. And all the girls would be there. But then you would talk to him there. He was a regular guy. I talked to him, and I never forgot the day he stuck his hand in his pocket and he came out with a knife. He said, "You see this knife? This is my good luck piece. I always carry it with me, and I never have a problem." From what I understand he flew about 13 or 15 missions, see, when you're up high you don't fly every time. I had B every six missions you got an Air Medal, and I got another Air Medal for shooting down the fighter B so I have five Air Medals. I have the Air Medal and four clusters, so each cluster is an Air Medal, you put those on the original one. And then also when we finished our missions, we were given the Distinguished Flying Cross, which I have, in fact my son wanted all this, I had it upstairs, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with the oak leaf clusters.

Aaron Elson: Did anybody take pictures of the plane when it came back?

George Noorigian: Not that I know of. We didn't have any cameras that I know of. That's why I say I hoped they would have come back to our base. The pilot was very cautious and he wanted to go to Manston, but we had enough fuel I think to land at our base in Tibenham. And I wanted the guys who were there waiting for us to see the plane, because they were all waiting for us to come back.

Aaron Elson: What was the reception when you did get back the next day?

George Noorigian: Oh, Jesus. They took us in for briefing, see, we waited, and they gave us a plane. I don't remember staying there overnight. Mercer said we stayed there overnight, and then they gave us a plane to go back. That I don't remember. They had a plane there, from our squadron, that they worked on and it was all ready to go back, so they gave us the plane to take back to our base.

Aaron Elson: So you flew back?

George Noorigian: Yeah. We flew back to our base. He says we stayed at Manston overnight. I don't remember.

Aaron Elson: Did your plane have a name?

George Noorigian: Usually, when you got a new plane, they wanted you to put a name on it, right? So you had a crew chief on the ground. One crew chief, he took care of that plane. He didn't take care of two or three. Just one. Him and maybe there were four or five others underneath him. That was their job, to take care of that plane. So when we got that plane, a new plane, and we were talking about naming it, he came over to us and said, 'Fellows, can I say something?'

I said, 'Sure.'

He said, "Every time they put a name on a plane, the plane gets shot down. Do me a favor. Don't put any name on this plane." And we never put a name on it. "Isn't that something? The plane gets shot down, he says, every time they give it a name, maybe not the next mission but it'll get shot down. And some of those names they had were " I had a list of those names, I don't know what happened to it. And then, what they used to put on the plane, every time you flew a mission they would put a bomb on it. And it showed you how many missions that the plane flew. We had one plane there, they called it the Cat. You should have seen all the bombs on that damn thing. They couldn't shoot that damn thing down. And the crew chiefs, day and night they'd have to work, they only had trouble with that plane. They said, "Gee, one of these days it's gonna be shot down and they're gonna give us a new plane."

So what happened " this is before the mission " there was one group that had a bad time. They lost so many planes on the missions that they were going to disband the group and move the guys and the planes to the other groups. So what they did, they distributed the planes. They said, "We're gonna give one to the 703rd Squadron." Right away they said, "Ohhh," the fellows with the Cat. "Finally we're gonna get a new plane. We're gonna get a new plane."

So what happened, they told us to go and fly to the base, which wasn't far. You had to be careful when you flew there because they had so many groups there, all close together, when you're in a flight pattern you had to be careful you were not in somebody else's flight pattern. So we went there. I wasn't gonna go at first, but "Ahh, let's go. Let's go." My co-pilot, Paul, says, "Let's go."

I said, "All right."

We went there, and there were six of us. We were gonna get rid of the Cat. We were gonna take the Cat up there, leave it, and come back with a new plane. So we went on that base, and we went up to the tower and said, "We're from the 445th. You've got a plane for us?"

"Yeah," he says, "there's the jeep. He'll take you out to it."

And so we all got in the jeep and we went out there. And we're going along and we're seeing all these planes. So finally he stops in front of this one plane. I said, "Is that the plane?"

"Yes, it's here. That's your plane."

It was another Cat. We looked at it. What a mess that plane was! I said, "We were supposed

to get a new plane!@

AI=m sorry. This is what was assigned to you. You=ve got to take it, fellows. You=ve got to go back with her.@

Well, Jesus Christ, we looked at that goddamn plane, and I=m telling you, when they got the thing ready to go, and they were starting up the engines, they had trouble starting the engines. It was terrible. So the co-pilot, Paul, called me in the back. He said, AGeorge, put your parachute on. I don=t even think we can get back to our base. We may have to ditch this plane.@ He said it was terrible.

So we managed to take off, and we only had a short distance to go. So we went there. And we pulled into the base. And they were all waiting for us to come back. Well, we came in for a landing, and each plane had its own place to park, so we knew where to go. We pulled the plane down and we went into the parking spot. When we pulled that plane in that parking spot, the crew chief that was there and the guys, I think they all cried. They said, AWhere=s the new plane?@

AThis is what they told us to take and that=s it.@

Well, the guys almost died. They almost died. You know, that plane was shot down after two missions. I found out later. Can you imagine that? Jesus Christ. I was married and I had my one son that was here, Dennis. I was married before Pearl Harbor, and I had a son, he was about two years old at that time. So I had a picture of my wife and my son together, and I had a bunk; we had nissen huts, you should have seen, the accommodations were terrible. Jesus Christ. If you wanted to take a shower you had to go outside. No toilet. The toilet was outside. To get toilet paper was a project B and if you got toilet paper, you should have seen the toilet paper. It was like sandpaper. I sent some home to my wife. It was terrible. Then the showers, every time you went to take a shower, cold as hell. Every once in a while somebody went there, he=d come back, AHey, fellas! There=s hot water!@ Jesus, everybody=d be running out there. You had to go out there fast before all the hot water disappeared. But I had this picture of my wife and my son. I kept it by my bunk. And there was another nice guy in our squadron, he was married before Pearl Harbor too, and his wife was expecting. He used to see that picture. He=d say, AGeorge, I just love it. My wife is expecting. I hope she has a boy. I want to have a picture taken of her and the baby.@ And one day I=m in the bunk there taking it easy, he comes running in, he says, AGeorge!

George! George!@

I said, AWhat happened?@

He says, AI just got word from my wife. She had a baby boy!@ And, he says, ABoy, I=m gonna have that picture taken. Sure as hell.@ He says, AI want it right next to me.@ A week later, his plane was shot down and he was killed. A week later.

Aaron Elson: Do you remember his name?

George Noorigian: Oh, no. I wish I did. It=s hard for me to remember now. He was the nicest guy. You know, the flight surgeon, you=ve got to bless him. Because we were supposed to fly 35 combat missions, but after that mission, and what happened, the flight surgeon went to the commanding officer and said, AThese fellows, 30 missions.@

The commanding officer said, AYou can=t do that, because a change like that is going to affect everybody.@

He said, AIf you don=t permit them to just fly 30 missions, I=m gonna ground them.@ He was the only one who could supercede the commanding officer. He said, AI=ll ground the crew.@ That won=t permit them to fly. So finally the commanding officer said, AAll right. We=ll make it 30 missions for these boys.@ And he was the one that did it. Mercer didn=t know that. I don=t know if he did or not. He was the one. The flight surgeon. He was good. If you had a problem anytime, that=s the guy you saw.

Aaron Elson: What kind of problems would you have?

George Noorigian: Well, if you had a problem with cold, or shaking, you know. You never knew, you know, you=re flying up there; we had a number of guys they had to take them off, because they were in bad shape.

Aaron Elson: Did they have the shakes?

George Noorigian: Yeah, they'd shake. You know, from all that stress. The stress. That's a tremendous stress, having planes come over, having to shoot there, you see the enemy aircraft. You see a plane on the side of you blow up. Anti-aircraft. And you still kept on going, you couldn't turn back. We had one bombardier, he was in before me, and he was scheduled to fly 35 missions. He had 34 missions; he had one more mission left. And he was in the nose turret. He was a small guy, so he could fit in there. And what happened, on his 35th mission, we were flying alongside of him. And anti-aircraft came and hit the nose of his plane, just at that time as we were flying over the Channel and approaching the coast of France. And I said, "Hoo-ly Jesus! He must have been in that nose turret." It blew off the nose turret.

Aaron Elson: Did the plane go down?

George Noorigian: No, the plane was still all right. The engines were still flying, the wings were all right, but it just hit the front of the nose turret and blew it off. Well, he had to turn around and go back. So we didn't know what happened. Jesus. We flew that mission and we came back. As we landed, "Whatever happened to So-and-So?" Do you know, he was there to meet us! I said, "I thought you were in that nose turret when it blew off."

He said, "I was doing something, trying to get my guns in shape, but I had trouble in the turret. So I stepped out of the turret to pick up something. Just as I stepped out, the goddamn thing blew off. And here I'm standing there and it was all open." Could you imagine that? So when he came back, you know what they told him? They gave him credit for the mission. "That's your 35th mission, that's all buddy!" You hear stories like that.

Another time "I don't know if I should tell you this. Are you interested in it?"

Aaron Elson: I'm interested.

George Noorigian: They had these old planes on the base. Finally, they said they were gonna take these old planes "three of them" up to Ireland. See, when you first went over, for one week before you went to your base, they had a training base in Ireland. These were fellows that had just finished combat, and they told you what to expect when you get into combat. In the

States half of our missions were flown at night. In combat, daytime. If it was dark, you didn't fly. See. They told us what to expect. And that was in above Belfast. So they told us, 'Take three of the planes back, to where they train, and we'll take one of our better planes.' There were six in each plane. And on the way back there would be 24; there would be enough room for 24 guys. So we were supposed to go on it and this is after we finished our missions. See, when you finish your missions, that was it. You didn't fly any more missions and you could do anything you wanted. You could go to Paris, anyplace you wanted, but you had to notify where you were gonna be, because all of a sudden your orders would come in. You never knew when your orders would come to go home. So they told us, 'Make sure you tell us where you are.' So my co-pilot says, 'George, come with us.'

I said, 'Paul'

He said, 'Come with us. It's a flight to Ireland. Maybe you could stay there overnight and see something.' Because we hadn't done anything. I was just glad to be on the ground. I went to Norwich, and to London and we had been to London a number of times but after a while, we were just tired. We wanted to get the hell back home.

So, 'All right, Paul,' I said, 'I'll go.'

So we got ready to go on the mission.

'I'm sorry, fellows, it's canceled. The weather's bad in Ireland.'

The second time it happened, the same thing happened again. The weather's bad in Ireland. So finally, they called us again. This is the third time. And that day they were supposed to have a regular mission over Germany. But the weather got bad over Germany, and they didn't want the pilots to fly, because by the time they'd fly and come back it would be dark.

The weather over Ireland was not bad, though, so they said 'Get the fellows to take and get rid of the old planes.' So they were gonna call us early in the morning, because when you get ready for a mission you're talking 2:30, 3 o'clock in the morning. That's when I used to see Jimmy Stewart sitting close by, on those briefings, where they tell you what to expect. He would be there too. So we were ready to go. But at the last minute they told us, 'Oh, you don't have to go. We have someone else that's taking your place.' One of the fellows in the squadron that we knew, he was supposed to fly that mission. They were all ready to go. They had their flight gear

on, and they canceled the mission. So he found out about the trip to take the old planes to Ireland, and he said, "Let me take Mercer's plane." The one Mercer's gonna fly. He says, "Hell. I've got nothing to do here, I'm all dressed up to fly. Let me take his plane and let the fellows sleep, don't wake them up."

So he took our plane to Ireland. They went to Ireland, they had no trouble. So on the way back in fact our flight commander was the co-pilot in that plane; it was a newer plane, so they all came back in that plane. Over Liverpool, on the way back, the plane blew up in midair. They had just had gone over the Irish Sea, just over Liverpool and it blew up in midair and it killed the 24 guys on the plane. And we were supposed to be on that plane.

There were 24 guys on that plane, and like I told you, you get some of these guys that smoked, and they didn't give a damn where it was. And a lot of these planes, the gas tanks had small leaks, and you'd always have those gas fumes. With 24 guys in the plane, they were lined up in the bomb bays, in the back, in the front. So there probably was a guy right underneath one of those gas tanks, if I'm not mistaken, he took out a cigarette and he lit the goddamn match. Why should it blow up? They could never figure it out, but the guys at the base, we figured it out. Somebody lit a match with a leaky tank, and it blew the whole goddamn plane up. The flight surgeon said he went there to identify the bodies, and he said, "One of the fellows I identified, he was all dressed up in uniform. You thought he was sleeping on the ground. There wasn't a sign on him." But don't forget, they fell from that height, and they had no chutes. And he was one of the fellows that had finished his missions. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine me, us, being on that plane and then telling my wife you've got nothing to worry about, we're gonna be home, and then having, having the Air Force go to the house, knock on the door and tell her, "I'm sorry to tell you, your husband was killed in action." Jesus, that was Y oh, Jesus Christ.

Aaron Elson: That's got to make you a little nuts.

George Noorigian: Aach! You know, you want to hear another story?

Aaron Elson: Sure!

George Noorigian: I'm full of stories. This is a time after we came back from overseas. I was supposed to get the assignment of my choice. I had a superior rating, and I wanted to go into bomb sight maintenance. Automatic pilot and bomb sight, where they took care of it, and it was a captaincy rating. I was a first lieutenant. I suggested I want to go into bomb sight maintenance. They said, "Look, if you want to stay here, the fellow that we have there now would like to leave and we could put you in his place, you know," but then my squadron commander said, "You know, George, the only trouble is, if you take that job and the orders come through for you to go home, forget about it. You're gonna stay here till the end of the war. Personally, take the orders, go back home, we'll give you all the recommendations, and get the job in the States," see. So when I came back, they sent us down to Atlantic City. I went and I was interviewed. I had all the information, all the papers. I said, "I want that assignment at an Air Force base," and I said, "I've been highly recommended for it."

"Sorry, fella, we can't do it."

"I have all the recommendations here. Why not?"

"We have no openings."

He refused to help me out. He said, "What we're gonna do is reassign you to Texas." That's where I had my training. Go back to Texas. Oh, Jesus.

Aaron Elson: Where was your wife, in New Jersey?

George Noorigian: Yeah, in fact she was with me in Atlantic City. They gave me two weeks and I stayed there and then I came back home, and from there I got orders to reassign me to Texas. But she had to stay there with the kid. I couldn't travel; how am I gonna travel with her? I thought it was a base in the East, close by here, that I could bring my wife and kid. We had a number of bases here, up in New England or over here in Baltimore, Pennsylvania. But they assigned me to that goddamn base in Texas. And then I found out, they're getting us ready to fly in B-29s to Japan. They wanted us to fly combat missions in Japan, and they wanted us to get used to a B-29. Of course a B-29 was a big plane at that time, compared to what we had there was no comparison. So that was our main mission.

And what happened, on the way back from England B we didn=t fly back, we took the Aquitania, that was the sister ship of the old Leviathan, old German boat B we were on the Aquitania, and it took us about six days, because that was a fast ship at that time. They went 25 miles an hour. So six days we were on this boat, and you meet different people. I was with my co-pilot most of the time. And we met this one fellow, Commander Downey. He saw us there, and he came over, very friendly, Commander Downey. He said, AI=m attached to the British Embassy in Washington. You fellows, if you flew combat, I=d like to hear what you tell me about combat. I=m very much interested.@ So for the six days we would talk to him. Oh, he was a nice guy, and he knew everybody. He=d be talking about a governor, first name, everybody was on a first-name basis. So one day I said to Paul, AIs he pulling our leg?@ You know, here=s this first name this, first name that. I said, AHe=s with the British Embassy, maybe he knows the guys.@

So finally we landed in New York, and he says, AFellows, if I could help you out any day, let me know. Just write to me to the British Embassy in Washington.@

Then they gave me this assignment, then I=m back in Texas again, and I couldn=t get my wife down there. So one day I=m in the barracks there with three other guys, we=re all officers there. All of a sudden I said, AHey, I=ve got an idea. I=m gonna write to my friend Commander Downey in the British Embassy in Washington, and I=m gonna tell him what happened, because I think he would be interested in knowing,@ you know. And I wrote this letter. I said, AYou know, the Air Corps is no different than civilian life. It=s not what you know, it=s who you know.@ And I said, AThe assignment I was supposed to get, I could have got it overseas but when I came here, they don=t want to know from nothing. My wife was supposed to be with me. I can=t bring my wife here.@

So we were flying training missions and going to classes. And one day we were in class and the officer of the day came in. He went up and spoke to the officer in charge, and then he turned around. He said, AIs there a Lieutenant Noorigian here?@

I said, AYes, right here, Sir.@

He said, AYou=re wanted in the office immediately,@ of the commanding officer.

So I said, AUh oh. I=ll be right there.@

And all the fellows in the class said, "Holy Jesus, George. What did you do?"

I went up to headquarters, and there was a captain there. He's the one who interviewed me. He said, "We've got special orders from the Pentagon and they want an immediate response. You are available for three assignments."

I said, "I am?"

"Bomb sight maintenance" and two others which I forgot all about. But I said I wanted that bomb sight maintenance.

He said, "Is that the one you want?"

I said, "That's right."

He said, "Okay. I'll put that down. We'll send it right in."

And just before I left, you know what the guy said to me? He said, "Who the hell do you know to get something like this?"

Then I found out "oh, just before that interview I got a letter back from Commander Downey, saying that he's so sorry that you could not get the assignment of your choice and they gave you an assignment that you don't want and they want to send you back to combat." He said, "I'm in the British Embassy and there's not much I can do, but I have a good friend, Howard," and he circled it, "Major General Howard Craig in the Pentagon," he called him Howard. "I spoke to Howard and I gave him your letter."

That was before I heard anything. But then I told the fellows, "You know, that letter was given to the major general of the Pentagon." Can you imagine that? Then I got the assignment and I was sent up to Minnesota for training, for two or three months, I had bomb sight maintenance, automatic pilot training. I went up there by myself. When I came back I would be rated a bomb sight maintenance officer. I wanted to get transferred over to the East Coast, but I never mentioned that. They said, "No, you're gonna come back and stay in the base in Texas." But when I was up in Minnesota, I got hold of my wife and said, "Come to Minnesota and on the way back, I'll buy a car, instead of taking a train back, and we'll come back to Texas together." And that's what we did.

I don't know, I've got another one I could tell you.

Aaron Elson: Go right ahead!

George Noorigian: I'm lucky to be here. Eighty-one years old. I just turned 81, believe me, somebody's looking down after me. I have a good wife, that's why.

When we were overseas, we got our base pay and we got flight pay. We had to fly four hours a month, and we got fifty percent more flight pay on our base. But coming back by boat, and then before we could get back into the training again, it was several months. And they gave you three months to make up that flight pay. At the third month if you got twelve hours in, they'd credit the other months for it. We had a number of guys like me, so they had special training missions on Sundays. AHow many hours do you need?@ AEight hours.@ AHow many hours do you need?@ ATwelve hours.@ Okay, you with twelve hours, we'll send you out to Arizona. Tucson. AIf you go to Tucson and come back, you'll get your twelve hours.@ So one Sunday I left, to get those twelve hours. There were three others on the plane with us. And we flew in an AT-11, that's a smaller plane, a twin-engine plane. And what did you do, you just took a book along, there's nothing much you could do. We were flying out there, and we were over Arizona, over the mountains. And we figured the pilot knew his way there. Finally, he turns around and says, AYou know what, fellows? I'm lost.@

AYou're lost?@

AYeah,@ he says. AI can't find Tucson. I called on the radio and I couldn't get any response.@ And we look down. Where the hell are we? We're in the mountains of Arizona. There's nothing there. You can't see any town, no air base, no nothing. And on top of it, we were very low on gas. He says, AI've only got about fifteen minutes of gas left.@

I said, AHoly God, what are we gonna do now? Jesus, after all this stuff I've been through.@

We just kept flying, and finally he came to one place where we saw what looked like a little field. So we went down and took a look. It looked like a little plowed field, and of all the things, somebody had put up one of those wind bags. So it must be an emergency little field. At the end of the field there was a drop of about four or five hundred feet, and it was just a small field.

The pilot came in and we managed to land just before we dropped down.

Where the hell are we? In the middle of noplac. The next thing, about five minutes later, all

Indians started to come around us. The squaws with their papooses. And then a car pulled up, and it was the sheriff of that area.

I said, "Where the hell are we?"

"You're on Apache Indian ground."

We told him what happened, and he said, "Fellows, you're lucky. This is the only little spot here in this whole area where you could have landed. I hate to tell you how many times I've had to go up into the mountains and bring back bodies of these fellows that never could land the plane. I tell you what," he said. "Come back into town, and we'll have to call up, there's a base, McNair, I think. He said, "We can't call from White River. We have one telephone operator and she's off on Sunday."

We said, "That's all right."

We asked if we could get something to eat.

He said, "Well, we have two white women here, they have a little restaurant. They're closed on Sunday but I'll call them and tell them to come over and open up for you fellows and give you a meal." And she did that. All you want, nice steak and onion. I never forgot that. So he says, "After you finish eating," he said, "I'll take you into McNair, and you could call from there, and call Tucson, and tell them what the deal is. They'll be looking for you."

So we stayed there overnight, and we went to the trading post. The fellow who had the trading post was a white guy, he was from Chicago, he came down with his wife. He had a couple of kids. And he came in and said, "Fellows, where are you gonna stay?"

I said, "We don't know."

He said, "We have accommodations if you want. A dollar a night."

I says, "A dollar! Fine!" In fact, he said, "I'll even give you a meal." Wild turkey. He said, "This is beautiful hunting country." So we stayed there overnight, and during the early morning they came down with a gas truck and filled up our tanks, and we managed to take off. We did all right taking off. On the way back we made one stop in Texas, and when we got ready to take off they said the weather was bad at our base and we'd have to stay overnight.

So we went to a little place overnight, a little town, Wink. Wink, Texas. It was an oil town. We landed at Wink. We figured maybe we'd get a motel or something there. And there was

another plane that had come in just ahead of us, and they had a number of people on that plane, and we went to the little hotel there, and the woman in charge said, AI have no more room here. But come to my house,@ another dollar a night. AYou don=t mind, do you?@

ANooooo.@ Heck, as long as we have a place to sleep. Then we took off. And she was very pleasant. She said, AMy husband is in the service, too, and he=s nowhere nearby.@

I said, AWhere is he stationed?@

She said, AFort Monmouth, New Jersey.@

I said, AFort Monmouth! I=ve been trying to get into Fort Monmouth for three years!@ He was in Wink, Texas, and they sent him to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Could you imagine that? I told her that. I said, AThat=s where we live!@

Aaron Elson: Did you go on the Gothe mission, where the 445th lost 13 planes in February?

George Noorigian: No. I only flew for three months. Do you know, I got my 30 combat missions in three months? In July, August and September. That=s a hell of a lot. It took most of the guys a year to get. But our squadron commanding officer came from Massachusetts. He was a good friend of my co-pilot, Paul. So what he did, he said, ALook, I=ll try to get you fellows in as many missions as I can in the beginning, because once the weather changes in October, it=s bad here. In five minutes it gets clouded over and you=re all set, and you have to go back.@ So we flew those missions. Our last mission was September the 27th, can you imagine that?

We came back just before the Battle of the Bulge. But I remember, we came back, and we had to go up to Scotland to get the Aquitania. Overnight we had to stay in one of those Limey barracks, and they gave us a breakfast that morning. How these Limeys ever lived I don=t know. Twice I had to eat there. The food is terrible. I=m telling you, I never had food like that. They had sausages, I think they were made of sawdust. Meat? No, you didn=t get any meat. On Sundays you got oatmeal. They had oatmeal for breakfast, flat as hell. But that=s the only thing I could eat. And they also had, they would fry bread. Just fry bread in grease, and serve that. Not an egg, in grease. Just to smell that made my stomach sick. And they put that in front of me. I said to the guy next to me, he was eating, I said, AHere, you take mine.@

He said, AI don=t want the damn thing.@

They had a tough time there. I felt sorry for these Limeys, you know. They had a tough time.

Aaron Elson: Before the Kassel mission, did you have any contact with German fighters?

George Noorigian: No. We saw them in the distance. We never had contact with them. Because we had fighter protection. On my last mission we could see them at a distance. Boy, that last mission, we had to go back over Germany and Jesus, I=m telling you, any kind of a plane up in the air, I was watching.

Aaron Elson: You had one mission after the 27th?

George Noorigian: Yeah, that was my 29th.

Aaron Elson: What was that last one like?

George Noorigian: Well, I tell you what, after that bad mission, we were glad to get back. Paul Pouliot and my navigator, they had flown 30 missions. They had gone with another crew, but Mercer and I hadn=t. Kaasel was my 29th mission.

Aaron Elson: So you had to fly without your regular crew?

George Noorigian: No, I flew with the regular crew.

Aaron Elson: Was Mercer the pilot then?

George Noorigian: Yeah, he was the pilot.

Aaron Elson: But Pouliot didn=t have to fly.

George Noorigian: No. I told Paul, ALook, do me a favor. Why don=t you come in and fly

with us at co-pilot? It makes me feel better. @

Aaron Elson: And what did he say?

George Noorigian: ANo, @ he said. AGeorge, that=s enough for me. That=s all. That=s enough. @

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