

## Jack French 1999 interview

Jack French: I've been making him (Bob Timms) famous, I guess. I've copied the story several times and given it to different people, like I gave a copy to Dewey, I've given a copy to Herb Schwartz. Have you met him by any chance?

Aaron Elson: No.

Jack French: He was my tail gunner, and he's the only one left that I know of, of my crew. I've never been in contact with any other guys that were with me except Charlie Huddleston, and we got together, what was it, Dayton was the first time that we met Charlie and Herb? Was it Dayton?

Jack's wife: Yes.

Jack French: We got together up there, and I've seen Herb since, at the Chicago get-together that we had, but unfortunately Charlie died a couple of years ago now.

Aaron Elson: Did Bill Dewey include this in that booklet he put together?

Jack French: I have no idea. But it's the story of the mission from wakeup call to getting back.

Aaron Elson: I'm a Johnny come lately to this. I was in Europe two and a half years ago and I met Walter Hassenpflug there. He brought me to the monument, told me the story, and I've been fascinated by it ever since. I started a World War II oral history web site on the Internet, and I thought gee, this would make a wonderful addition to the web site and also I eventually would hope to write a book about the mission.

Jack French: When we were at Dayton I was interviewed by, what's the name of the guy who's making the film? They're making a film history. PEG!!!!

Peg French: Yes?

Jack French: I'm great at remembering names. Diskewitz or something ...

Aaron Elson: Dzenowagis. Joe Dzenowagis.

Jack French: That's right. I had an interview, he interviewed me up there in Dayton, and he sent me the tape of the interview which was about 18 minutes long, which is kind of interesting. I didn't know Joe's name.

Aaron Elson: Were you born in New Hampshire?

Jack French: No, I was born in Massachusetts. Until I went in the service when I was 21, I had lived in Massachusetts in a town called Arlington just outside of Boston, and then went in the service and in '42 went through the usual cadets and training and all that sort of thing, but when I got out I finally, I got married in '45 and moved out to another little town north of Boston called Peabody, and stayed there for twenty-some-odd years. I flew with Northeast Airlines back then. We built, my former wife and I built a house up in New Hampshire, and that eventually unfortunately ended in a divorce, but, you know, most of the time that's where I've been, except when I've been in the service.

Aaron Elson: Now you had some college ...

Jack French: Yeah, I graduated from New England Aircraft School, which is an aircraft construction school.

Aaron Elson: So you wanted to be in aircraft design or construction?

Jack French: Yeah, that's what I was going to do, and most of the guys that went through with me went into that field when they got out. But my father had just died just before I graduated, so I thought better to stay at home and kind of look after things there.

Aaron Elson: Were you the oldest son?

Jack French: No, no. I had two older brothers and an older sister. But of course my older brothers were long gone, so I figured I should stay home, so I went to work with Northeast Airlines in the purchasing department, and after that, after I signed up and got in cadet training, it just progressed from there. When I got out of the service I went back into the purchasing department until I could get my flying status, so, it was just after the war and the airlines were expanding and all that sort of thing, so what happened was, I would fly during the summer months, but New England being strictly a vacation resort type area at that time, especially with the airlines, I would fly co-pilot in the summer and then I'd be laid off in the winter. I worked with GE for a while testing jet engines, and I instructed, and I sold gas, and I sold Christmas trees, anything, as I was trying to make my way in the airline industry. And finally after about seven years I got on steady and then I got to be captain, and in 1972 Northeast merged with Delta, and I retired from Delta back in 1980.

Aaron Elson: Now, you enlisted in the air cadets?

Jack French: Yeah, I enlisted in the Air Force and they sent me through cadet school. And, you know, we get the ground school(?) in San Antonio, and then we went up to what? It's so long ago I have trouble remembering.

Aaron Elson: It's like a travelogue. You know, we went here, we went there, Biloxi, to Keesler Field, to this, to that, you don't have to go through the litany.

Jack French: Yeah, well, let's see, from Cadets, I just remembered, I went to Vernon, Texas, for primary, then I went up to Enid, Oklahoma, and then I went to, what, let me see, I don't know, I can't remember. I ended up going to Fort Worth for B-24 training eventually, and from there we went on to Biggs Field, that's up by El Paso.

Aaron Elson: When did you get your crew?

Jack French: I got my crew up at Boise, Idaho. I had a crew at Fort Worth and we trained together, and I had a real good crew. As a matter of fact my navigator on that crew was one of my old buddies from home, in Arlington. Most unusual. But we were just about through with the training and we went out for a training mission, and we were climbing up to altitude, and back then they were using automotive gas in the aircraft, 87 octane.

Aaron Elson: That's low.

Jack French: It's low. It's an automobile fuel, it's not aviation fuel.

Aaron Elson: And they were using airplane fuel in the tanks that my father's tank battalion ...

Jack French: They were trying to save all the aviation fuel for the overseas airplanes, so we ended up losing three engines climbing up, so I started back for the field, and we couldn't maintain the altitude, we threw everything out that they could throw out. So I got the crew bailed out but I was so low by then that I had to ride it in.

Aaron Elson: You had the crew bail out?

Jack French: Yeah, because we weren't going to make it to the airport, back to the base, so I got the crew all bailed out, but, as I say we were so low I couldn't have gotten out of the seat, so I rode the thing in, and fortunately I was able to get out of it before the fire got up to me. So, that broke up the crew, so they just kept me around ....

Aaron Elson: It broke up the crew because of injuries?

Jack French: Yeah, we had a couple of guys had broken ankles and that stuff when they landed. And the rest that were all right, they just scattered them around. And they sent me up to Boise to pick up the crew up there. Their original aircraft commander was a colonel, and I guess the powers that be decided they didn't want to send a colonel overseas to get shot at (laughing), so they sent me up to take that crew over. So we flew it over to Scotland, we picked it up in Kansas City, and through New England and then across over to Prestwick.

Aaron Elson: A new one?

Jack French: New airplane, yeah. We flew it over, but once we got there they took the airplane and put it wherever they wanted it. Then they shipped us down and we ended up in Tibenham, and got the usual checkout training there, and we started, our first mission was on D-Day.

Aaron Elson: Really?!

Jack French: Yeah. June 6.

Aaron Elson: My goodness. Now you were the pilot, yes?

Jack French: Yeah, I was the command pilot.

Aaron Elson: Did you have to fly one or two missions with another crew to break you in?

Jack French: No, I didn't. They took us up and showed us how to do formation, of course we'd already flown formation here before we went over, in practice and that sort of stuff, but they checked us out in formation flying, and ... Go! So, you know, we just followed along with the group, they put us in the formation.

Aaron Elson: So your first mission was on D-Day?

Jack French: Yes.

Aaron Elson: That must have been an awesome spectacle.

Jack French: It was. Being new and all that kind of stuff, I was pretty busy watching the airplane that I was supposed to be flying with. I didn't really get to sightsee much, but I guess it must have been an awesome thing for those that could look down and see what was going on.

Aaron Elson: And was your target inland from the beaches, or was it in Germany?

Jack French: No, it was just off the beaches, in that area, what they called no-ball targets at the time, anything like the anti-aircraft and that sort of thing.

Aaron Elson: What did they call it?

Jack French: No-ball targets (laughs). What they were, were just general targets to hamper the German opposition to, we never knew precisely what they were, whether it was a particular gun emplacement or anti-aircraft or what, go fly and drop your bombs on the leader.

Aaron Elson: What was your first indication ... did you know that the lead plane had turned off course?

Jack French: Well, yeah, Timms, like the other navigators that were in this thing, he said, Why are we turning here? Of course there was radio silence and that sort of thing and I guess even some of the other, from what I have heard since I've been with these other groups, apparently somebody called and advised them that they had turned at the wrong time, but they kept on going, you know, they had started off, and although we knew we were wrong, or though something messed up, what are you gonna do? What are you gonna do? Here you are in a formation of 34 airplanes, you're gonna go off somewhere? And if the lead airplane is jogging on, you follow him. You don't have a choice. I mean, even if you know he's wrong, there's no way you're gonna leave the formation. So you're stuck with follow the leader, that's what you've been trained to do and even if you weren't trained to do it, you'd be foolish to ... where are you gonna go off by yourself? We didn't know from any other contact other than Timms had noticed that something was wrong in where we were going, and I guess, from what I hear, the other navigators that, of the ones that did return and the ones that were POWs and stuff, everybody knows somebody made a mistake. Why, nobody has ever figured out. Which is, I don't, you know, the navigator went down, so who's to say who made the mistake, or why the mistake was made. I guess, obviously who made it was the lead navigator. Why it was made, I don't think anybody will ever know. I can't see how anybody is gonna ever figure it out, they've been trying for fifty some odd years now.

Aaron Elson: He was using a pathfinder, one of those PFF?

Jack French: I have no idea. I don't remember that.

Aaron Elson: They had something for through-the-clouds bombing.

Jack French: Yeah, we did.

Aaron Elson: Had those been known ... had they ever malfunctioned?

Jack French: I assume they had. That was out of my realm. You know, I wasn't a navigator. I knew about navigation, but I wasn't savvy enough in the equipment in the lead airplane, because we didn't all have the same things. That's what they were gonna do with my airplane when it got back, except it never did (laughs).

Aaron Elson: Once you were off course, what was the first indication to you that you were in trouble?

Jack French: When the boys out back said "We've got a lot of fighters up here!" You know. Because they came from the back, and that's the first alert we had, this swarm of German fighters. And they came zipping through us, and, you know, we didn't have any, because we were so far out of the bomber stream that we had no fighter escort either. There were fighters, we had fighter escort, but they were all with the bomb stream, however far away that was. And, no, the first indication we had that there was anything wrong was when the gunners in the aircraft called, because as I say, our VHF was out, we didn't hear this from any other airplane. The boys in the back spotted them, and they just came through the formation a couple of times.

Aaron Elson: This would have been the first time in 35 missions that you were attacked by fighters?

Jack French: Yeah.

Aaron Elson: Were they excited, or were they surprised?

Jack French: Darn surprised, that's for sure. Excited? I guess they probably were pretty excited but they weren't so excited that they weren't shooting. I'm sure that they were excited, they were probably a little scared, like everybody else was at that point when you see that sort of thing, but they did what they had to do, and I, from my knowledge of what went on afterwards, I guess they did get two or three fighters, we were never credited with them, but from what I talked with Charlie and with Hurt(?), they said that we did get some of them while we were there. Of course the first time the fighters came through the formation, we lost about a foot of one of the prop blades on the Number 1 engine, so of course we had to feather that before it tore the engine off. And they also shot my right rudder apart, so that was no good. And we had, eventually we feathered the Number 3 engine because that kind of cut down on the vibration from that rudder. The prop stream was dropping that rudder back there, we figured it was gonna tear the airplane apart. So we immediately dropped, couldn't stay with anything, there were no airplanes that a formation was left.

Aaron Elson: Now you say you shut down the Number 3 engine, was it functioning?

Jack French: It was functioning.

Aaron Elson: But you knew that the ...

Jack French: That the prop blast from that engine was really banging the rudder back there, because it's right in line with the Number 3 engine, and the rudder was torn up and it was just flapping, it wasn't doing any good.

Aaron Elson: That sounds like you knew what you were doing. That takes a little savvy.

Jack French: Well, you know, I got the report on the, of course I could feel it in the controls and all that sort of thing, and then when one, I don't know which one of the boys said the rudder's all shot up and flapping, so we were already out of formation and the fighters had gone, they only made a couple of passes.

Aaron Elson: Did you get a chance to look out and see what was going on with the other planes?

Jack French: Oh sure.

Aaron Elson: What do you recall seeing?

Jack French: The airplane that was in back of us to our upper right, he went by us from the cockpit on back and he started to turn to us, and so I had to turn away from him, and, you know, we could see the other airplanes being blown apart, and I was pretty busy trying to keep control of our airplane, both Doc and myself, Doc Cochran(?) the co-pilot, and we were having about all we could handle right then just keeping our airplane flying. And we didn't have an awful lot of time to look around outside. What we got mostly was from what the boys in the back saw, and they mentioned it, you know, and we talked about it. What little we did talk about it. You just saw an airplane and it just (claps his hands) gone ... pieces flying everywhere. So, you know, you're looking around waiting for the next one to see if you're gonna blow up, that's about the only thing you can do. Fortunately we didn't get hit in the bomb bay again because if we had, we probably would have blown up like the rest of them. We had big holes in the wing, and in back of the Number 2 engine there was a huge hole, the skin torn up and flapping up in the air. You could see right down into the hole. You know, as I say we just kept the darn airplane flying, and there wasn't anybody else around. Everybody had either gone down or had dropped out, I don't know whether the guys that landed back at Tibenham still had all their engines or not, I never even got to talk to them.

Aaron Elson: I'm gonna meet one of them tomorrow night.

Jack French: Are you?

Aaron Elson: Swofford.

Jack French: Oh, is that so?

Aaron Elson: George Collar was afraid he wouldn't want to talk about it. I figured while I'm down here I'll give him a call.

Jack French: You know, some of the people I never even knew at the time, you know, you didn't know, you knew the guys somewhat in your nissen hut, like you knew two or three of them, but you never knew anybody really very well. I didn't, at the time, didn't smoke and didn't drink -- I've since learned (laughs) -- but I didn't go to the officers club a lot to sit around and drink and raise cain and that kind of thing back then, so I didn't really get to know an awful lot of the guys, because that's a lot of them, they did, and I didn't. So it was just, that's the way I was, no reason for not knowing him or anything, but as I say, I didn't know Swofford I don't think. I may have known him through the briefings and that sort of stuff, but it's being able to say "Hi Joe" or whatever, I didn't know anybody except the guys that were actually in the nissen hut.

Aaron Elson: Tell me about the flight back now.

Jack French: Once the fighters had gone and we were on our own, we were just flying dead reckoning, because as I say, we didn't have much of our instruments left. The compasses were out, so we knew which direction France was in, so that's what we headed for. And we started up the Number 3 engine again because we needed it to keep in the air, even though the guys in the back threw out everything that they didn't need ...

Aaron Elson: Including their parachutes?

Jack French: No, they kept their parachutes (laughs), but anything that took up extra weight ...

Aaron Elson: The guns?

Jack French: No, we kept the guns, and we kept some ammunition, but anything extra that was hanging around, we had to lighten the airplane up because it wasn't flying very good. And I say we started the Number 3 engine up again because we could keep it running at a lower power, and it didn't raise so much heck with the rudder back there, and we just stayed with as little rate of synch(?) as we could, and somewhere when we were back there, I don't remember just whether it was just shortly after we got attacked, it seems to me it was, I know we were all on our own, and I don't, as I say I don't remember how long after the first attack, but one of the, the gunner on our port side or left side spotted a Fokke-Wulf 190 lining up from a distance, and we figured we just about had it, because with all the holes that we had in the wings and the gas tanks, gasoline was pouring into the bomb bay. We opened the bomb bay some so that it could get out, but if we'd have had a tracer hit that it would have blown sky high. But all of a sudden, out of the blue from nowhere a P-38 showed up, and as soon as the P-38 showed up the 190 went down to the deck, and I don't know what happened to the P-38, whether he went down after him, I have no idea what happened to him, but shortly thereafter the P-38 came back up and flew the wing for a while, and we waved, Thanks God! (laughs). And I don't even know who that was, you know, things get so confused after a while. But Timms got his maps out, what he had left of them because a lot of them blew out when we opened the bomb bay to get rid of some of the gas, he lost a lot of stuff, but he had enough left so that as we looked down through the clouds he finally spotted a couple of places that he was sure of, that we knew, and we finally realized we were over France. So we headed, he gave us a south heading, hopefully south, and we were toward Rheims, and as we got over that way we spotted a P-47 base. So we were low enough at that point to be able to determine what was going on on the ground, and it was a P-47 base we found out that they had just flown their very first mission from and were returning to, and we let down and circled the base. We had fair control of the airplane, so we circled and made a downwind leg and shot off some red flares, and they gave us a green one, so we came in and made the approach and put down what flaps we could, and, of course the gear would freefall, but we never got the nose wheel out. And the engineer went down and tried to push it out but he couldn't get it to go out, so we got him back up out of the nose, we were coming down on final approach, be we didn't obviously have an awful lot of control of the ailerons and rudder, obviously we didn't have any rudder control to speak of, but we landed and I held the thing, the nose up as long as I could because I knew what was going to happen with no nose wheel (laughs), so we held it off as long as we could hold it off, and finally just lost all kinds of control. And I tried to kick it off the side of the runway, there wasn't anything over there but dirt. It wasn't really a runway, it was one of those, they put down those grates on the ground, you know, that's all it was. So when the nose came down I tried to steer it off where they were using for a runway and I didn't get it all the way off, unfortunately, the back end of the airplane was still sticking out. But we got out of that thing. We were just darn fortunate that when the nose came down, we didn't get lots of sparks to start the thing, because we would have gone sky high with all that gas. Where the guys got of I don't know, they got out of the back. We must have gotten out of the escape hatch overhead in the cockpit, those of us who were up front, and jumped down off the nose. Then we got away from the airplane until we were sure enough that it wasn't gonna blow, because that's what our first thought was, and there wasn't much else after that. After we settled down a little bit and looked the airplane over as I say, it was pretty well shot up.

Aaron Elson: What kind of damage did it have that you saw?

Jack French: Well, the wings were full of holes, the rudder was gone, the whole, anywhere you looked in that airplane, you could see through the other side. Why nobody got hit I have no idea. You could stand there and look up through that airplane and you could see right up through, anywhere, I just don't understand how nobody got even a scratch. Not a scratch. Not even on the landing, you know. Then when we finally got up to the headquarters building there, they called Tibenham and told them that we were there, and Tibenham wouldn't believe them (laughs). They said, "No, that isn't them because they

got shot down. We have nine witnesses that that airplane went down." They said, "No, they're here." (laughs). And, later on, I forget whether it was later that afternoon or the next morning, it must have been later that afternoon, things run together a lot at this point you know. The radio operator that we had was pretty sharp, and he went back to the airplane and somehow or other, I think why we didn't have any HF in the airplane is the antenna was gone, so apparently he rigged up something and he called the base, and he told them where we were. They finally believed him. They sent an airplane over and picked up other people around. We got back to the base, it seems to me it was the next day, and we went to the usual long briefing afterwards, you know, and that kind of thing. Then we didn't do much of anything. Our missions were over. We hung around for a while at the base. I did a little formation when the new boys came, because they flew a Kassel mission the next day. But as the new crews came in, they had fellows like myself kind of initiate the guys to the new deal of wartime flying, formation flying and that sort of thing as instructor pilots for a while, because there wasn't, there were nobody left, like when I got over there everybody else had been on several missions, but after that, there wasn't anybody else there that had been on several missions, they had these guys on their first missions. So for the first couple of times I didn't go on missions, but we'd go up and I'd explain formation flying and stay close and that kind of thing. But I didn't stay there very long.

Aaron Elson: What was your debriefing like?

Jack French: Uh, just, "What happened?" Why? And the sort of thing like we're talking about, what happened and why? Do you have any idea as to why did you get off course and what happened during the battle and that sort of thing. And I think pretty much you can understand from my point of view as command pilot and my co-pilot, we were pretty darn busy keeping that airplane in the air. We didn't have time to look around and analyze just what this is doing and that's doing. We were too busy keeping our own airplane going, and keeping, you know. The guys in the back were doing the best they could do. So no conversation other than between the guys on the guns that, the fighter, X or B or whatever, but as far as up in the cockpit, we didn't have time to sit around and analyze what's going on outside.

Aaron Elson: Did you ask questions at the debriefing, like "How many planes did we lose?"

Jack French: Well I already knew that. When we got back, as soon as we got back, the guys that were left informed us that, you know, the airplanes that got back to the base and the ones that didn't quite make it to the base. Even on the way back, we came back on the Queen Elizabeth I think it was, and, but even at that, you didn't sit around and discuss it. I never discussed it with anybody. I'm not the kind of person would sit down in a bar room somewhere and talk about old times. As I said I didn't even to any 8th Air Force thing or other 2 AD until the last few years. I didn't know anybody in New England who was particularly interested.

Aaron Elson: Did the other crew in your hut fly that day?

Jack French: No, I don't think, I think we were the only crew out of that hut. My bombardier, Switzer, he didn't fly with us that day.

Aaron Elson: How come?

Jack French: I don't know. I guess he was either, either he had a cold or what, I don't know. But one thing he did do, because when somebody's missing like that, it doesn't take the people at the base long to come and gather their belongings, but Switzer and the rest of the group in there, the guys came to pick our stuff up, and they wouldn't let them touch it.

Aaron Elson: Oh, so as soon as they heard you were down they went to ...

Jack French: Yeah, they come around and pick up your personal belongings and put them somewhere, but the guys in the nissen hut wouldn't let them in. So they turned them away, but they came back, but there was nothing there. The guys had taken and scattered it all around through everybody else's. The guys in the nissen hut had taken all the stuff and scattered it amongst themselves, so that the next time they came by there was nothing for them to take. (laughs)

Aaron Elson: So when you came back your stuff was all scattered about?

Jack French: Yeah.

Aaron Elson: How did that make you feel?

Jack French: Well, it made me feel pretty good actually because to think the guys, Switzer knew, he said he knew we didn't get killed in that thing, so he wasn't gonna let anybody take our stuff. And so there was Crocker and Timms and myself in there, and the other guys in the nissen hut just took all our different stuff and took something and put it somewhere else so that the group that comes and takes that sort of stuff wouldn't have anything to take, so we got it all back when we came back, which was very nice of the guys.

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Jack French: I had a DC-6 and we were going from Boston nonstop to Montreal, and the weather was not good up over northern New Hampshire and Vermont, I don't know if you're familiar with that area but it's all mountains. We got a call from air traffic control that there was a National Guard airplane up there that they couldn't get in contact with, and he was lost, would we please look for him? Because he didn't have much fuel and that sort of stuff but they knew he was in the area somewhere, so we said, "Well, we'll see if we can find him. So we went down under the clouds, we had permission to go wherever we needed to go, and we spotted him. So we finally got in contact with him on the radio and we got in contact with the air traffic controllers and we said that we had found him and that we would lead him on up through the mountains there and get him up to Burlington where he could land. Of course this little airplane that he had was just a little spotter airplane which didn't go very fast, so we had problems keeping our DC-6 slow enough, and we had passengers in back, we explained what was going on. So we're up there dragging around, flaps down and all kinds of stuff to stay slow enough so that we could stay in his sight as we went up on through, it was down by Lebanon when we found him. But we took him up to Burlington, up through the pass up there, and got him to land in Burlington, and of course we had to land then because we'd used up so much fuel, we landed at Burlington and refueled and then kept on going up to Montreal. That was kind of a fun trip (laughs)

Jack's wife: See, once a hero, always a hero.

Aaron Elson: For getting your plane down without a scratch to any of the personnel, did you get any kind of a medal or an award?

Jack French: No, nobody said nothing. They just got us back to the base and we stood around there for a while and they shipped us back home. No, there was never any kind of recognition of that. I don't know that any of the people ever got any extra recognition.

Aaron Elson: There were so, not so many, but three or four planes in the same condition that Jack's plane was in, managed to land. The skill of those pilots, yourself included, it speaks a lot to the training and for the individual...

Mrs. French: I think so too. I think it speaks to the calmness and the mental attitude. ...

Jack French: Weird things happened to airplanes back in those days, weird weird things. But we were fortunate and we survived, that's all you can say, the good Lord was looking out for us. That's all you can say. There was a fair amount of skill and all that sort of thing and training and whatever you want to call it, but ...

Aaron Elson: Maybe you can explain one thing to me. There was a written account by Jack Mercer, who was one of the pilots, and he said that he looked out, and again, one of the memories that always stood with him, was that he saw two sets of propellers separate from the plane and continue flying in formation until they turned and windmilled. He thought that it might have been due, he said that it was probably due to a mistake by the pilots where they gave it too much thrust. Could that have happened?

Jack French: I wouldn't think so. As I say, you don't know. It could well be that they were shot, the engine could have seized, the props were going around, and if the engine seized there's nothing to stop the prop from shearing the shaft. That's one of the things that you'll never know, why that happened, but I guess, like I said before, the only thing that I remember about that time very vividly is seeing that airplane up here burning from the nose to the tail, and the long streak of fire. There have been pictures like that in several publications, not necessarily that airplane, but there have been, that's not the original, there have been many more that have done the same thing I guess. Because every once in a while in one of these things I've seen pictures like that, so I don't know, but ... a long time.