

Web Uebelhoer

September 30, 1999

Savannah, GA

©2000 Aaron Elson

Captain Web Uebelhoer was the pilot of the deputy lead plane in the 700th Bomb Squadron, which was leading the 445th Bomb Group on the Kassel mission.

Web Uebelhoer: You try to speak in the English language, but my name is a German name and correctly pronounced in German, it's "Oo-bel-herr."

Aaron Elson: Oo-bel-herr.

Web Uebelhoer: Oo-bel-herr. Jawohl.

Aaron Elson: You say your heritage is German. How many generations back do you go in America?

Web Uebelhoer: My great-grandfather came to the United States in 1854, so I guess I'm third or fourth generation.

Aaron Elson: When the war broke out, did you think about having to fight against Germany? Did you have any relatives there?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. Actually the Uebelhoers produced more German soldiers. And by the way, I met these people [after the war] and spent some time with them. They live in a little town called Nenslingen, about 60 miles north of Munich. Delightful town. Delightful people. We had a lot of fun with them.

We were over visiting as a result of the [Kassel Mission] memorial. We visited the memorial, and I had been corresponding; I had a telephone number and we got together and had a great time.

Aaron Elson: Did they tell you stories about their experiences?

Web Uebelhoer: No. They don't like to talk it about it probably. Well, this fellow my age, Karl Uebelhoer - he was the oldest living one in Nenslingen, and he could not speak English but his granddaughter could, and she asked him about the war. He had been with German troops in Russia, and he must have got the hell beat out

of him because he became very emotional. He was so emotional his granddaughter couldn't understand what he said. In German.

Aaron Elson: How old were you when you enlisted in the Air Corps?

Web Uebelhoer: I had just graduated from the University of Alabama in 1941, and I had pursued part of my studies in the ROTC program, so I'd just received the warning orders. I was an infantryman, I'd just received warning orders in something like July of 1941, and also I had passed the Air Corps, and I just sent a letter in blank to the War Department saying I've got my warning orders and I've passed the Air Force exam, and I prefer the Air Force, which of course was the Army Air Force, and my gosh, within that two weeks I had my orders to report to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to begin pilot training. I was about 26 years old at that time.

Aaron Elson: Were you married then?

Web Uebelhoer: No. Upon graduation from the Air Force training, I was assigned as an instructor in Blythedale, Arkansas, and then we were married. We were together about a year, and you know, you make some pretty serious mistakes in your life. I was set as an instructor pilot, and I was saying to the guys I was training, "This is what you're going to experience in combat." Hell, I didn't know anything about combat! That began to stick in my throat, and I volunteered to learn about combat, and that wasn't very smart of me. I learned about combat all right!

Aaron Elson: You said that almost in jest, that it was a mistake. Do you think it was a mistake?

Web Uebelhoer: No. I'm very proud of that. No, you're right. I don't want to do it again, but I'm damn glad that I got out of the training command and I found out about combat.

Aaron Elson: Did you grow up in Alabama?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, no. I'm from Indiana.

Aaron Elson: But you went to school in Alabama.

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. At the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa.

Aaron Elson: And you were a training pilot for about a year.

Web Uebelhoer: That's right.

Aaron Elson: Did you have any close scrapes in training, before you got into combat?

Web Uebelhoer: Just one. I was moving up in the ranks, and I was some sort of a squadron commander in the training command, and a good friend of mine sent me down to an auxiliary field; he wanted to check it from the air. He wanted to make a decision as to whether he was going to use that auxiliary field. And I became so involved - there was a retractable landing gear on this airplane, I didn't retract the landing gear and I slid into this training field. And I had a student with me, but we didn't get hurt.

Aaron Elson: What kind of a plane was that?

Web Uebelhoer: It was an AT-10, twin-engine. I don't know who made it. Good airplane. It was dependable.

Aaron Elson: So now you've volunteered to go for combat. You were a first lieutenant or a second lieutenant at the time?

Web Uebelhoer: First lieutenant. And I'd just been made squadron commander. I went to ... it's a flying field in Tennessee and I had been made squadron commander, and my orders promoting me to captain followed me, so I appeared in this training command for four-engine equipment, B-24s, as a captain and went through the training.

Aaron Elson: So you outranked a lot of the other officers.

Web Uebelhoer: I certainly did. Among fellow students I don't know that there were any captains.

Aaron Elson: When did you join the 445th?

Web Uebelhoer: Ah, that's a good question. I went over with the last complete unit, the 492nd Bomb Group, and boy, it was rough - there again, the first mission I went out on I ran out of gas and just got over the English coast and put this four-

engine aircraft down on its belly in an English farm field, and my God, we got away with it! One guy was, no broken bones, but the radio operator was kind of pinned in the wreck. So that's the way I started out in combat.

Aaron Elson: What day was that? Do you know?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. It was April 11, 1944.

Aaron Elson: So you came in well before the Kassel mission.

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. The Kassel mission was my 18th mission.

Aaron Elson: Where was your first mission to?

Web Uebelhoer: It was to Melun, France. It was just across the river from Switzerland. And the reason I ran out of gas - we were briefed, "Don't you drop your bombs in Switzerland because it's a neutral country." This was the first mission of this brand-new group, and boy oh boy, it takes probably ten to fifteen missions before you can claim to be a combat pilot, and we were all green. The lead ship circled and circled and circled, and ran out of gas. I wasn't the only one who ran out of gas, and some of them were not as fortunate as I was. People got killed trying to crash-land in England.

Aaron Elson: Were you a lead pilot?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. And, that's a very good question, because - I was a captain, but I was a rookie as far as combat experience. And they transferred me out of the group. I have a personal opinion on this. I was transferred out of the group because I was a captain and they wanted to promote some of those in the group, so I was transferred I think to the 44th Bomb Group and flew a few missions, and I don't know what mission it was, but then my crew was taken off of combat missions and we were trained as a lead crew.

Aaron Elson: So your first few missions were not with the 445th.

Web Uebelhoer: No.

Aaron Elson: Okay. I'm just piecing this together. You went over with the 492nd. So your crew was taken off combat and trained as a lead crew, and when did you go to the 445th?

Web Uebelhoer: I don't know. I can't give you an actual date. D-Day comes along here, June the 6th, 1944, and we flew a mission, one of the easiest missions I've ever had, and flew over the beach, and God help us, I hope that I didn't drop bombs on our troops. I was sure that I was in from the beach and then dropped bombs, I hit farmers' fields I suppose.

Aaron Elson: Had the troops already landed? Could you see them from the air?

Web Uebelhoer: I could not see them from the air. We assembled in the dark, and flew directly south, and we flew directly over the beach but there was a 10-10ths cloud cover, and I didn't see anything as far as troops and ships, I just went in, and as I say, I held those bombs long enough so that I wouldn't drop on my friendly troops, and we turned to the right, went over the Jersey and Guernsey islands, turned across the Channel and back home.

Aaron Elson: Did you go on the St. Lo raid?

Web Uebelhoer: No. That was a very unfortunate. They did drop on [friendly troops]. No, I was not on that mission.

Aaron Elson: The people who saw the St. Lo raids from the ground said that they never saw as impressive a sight as all those planes going over.

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, my God! Yes, we were putting up twelve to fourteen hundred four-engine bombers, B-17s and B-24s, protected by about a thousand fighters. And on one occasion I was sent out as a weather ship. The Continent was clear, and we said okay, come ahead, and then I was letting down to the side of this bomber stream, and boy oh boy, that was impressive, my God! Fourteen hundred four-engine bombers! Incidentally, I don't understand how the German people, I don't know how they kept their sanity. [That country] was bombed to hell.

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

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, yes. Well, the German fighters were losing the war and that became apparent on D-Day. I think two German fighters appeared across the beach, and from then on, except the Kassel mission, the German fighters were practically nonexistent. And we had so damn many of our fighters, when they did come in, it was just like a bunch of chickens in a hen yard finding something to eat. Wham! And that's the way the American fighters, they really shot up the German air force. But the Germans, I admire their courage. Two or three of them would come through our formations and shoot us down. I don't know how they did it, but they would shoot us down. But not en masse, as with the Kassel raid.

Aaron Elson: The morning of the Kassel raid, how did that unfold?

Web Uebelhoer: Well, I read Jim Dowling's book [Jim Dowling was profiled in "The Greatest Generation"] and I agree with him, it's not very far into Germany. Munich and Brunswick and Berlin, those were rough, long missions. Incidentally, I was afraid - any mission I ever flew I was afraid - so my fear was not intense, but I would say that mentally, it was an average mission.

Aaron Elson: How does that fear show itself? What do you think about?

Web Uebelhoer: That's a good question. I'll tell you, on rough missions - I don't know whether you want to include this in your story or not but I'm sure you can edit it out if you want - I had the feeling that I'd wet my pants. And when I got off of the target, we'd dropped our bombs, assembled and headed home, I didn't wet my pants but that is one of the feelings that I had. And it was amazing - and I've heard this from several fellows - the training that we had, you almost detached yourself from reality and mechanically did things you were trained to do.

Aaron Elson: So you detached yourself but you were still scared?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, yes.

Aaron Elson: How did the briefing go that morning?

Web Uebelhoer: It was normal. Average.

Aaron Elson: Who did you share your hut with? Did both crews go on the mission?

Web Uebelhoer: The other crew was Ken Mabis, and he didn't go on the mission that morning.

Aaron Elson: Did you know that you were going to go the day before?

Web Uebelhoer: I don't know how I was told, but I was aware, and God, I'm sure that a young man - as an old man, I couldn't possibly take it, because all those engines had to be worked on and warmed up, and you could hear the jeep come down through the living areas, and "Uebelhoer, you're up!" "Okay, I'm up and I'll get the crew." But constant fear.

Aaron Elson: Now, when did you know that you were off course?

Web Uebelhoer: In the bomb group, I was in second command. And almost, do you know the phrase "initial point"? The initial point was where you made a final turn and straightened the plane out and you turned it over to the bombardier, and he was actually flying the airplane through the bomb sight. Okay. Almost immediately - all of us were connected on the crew by interphone, and I can hear the navigator, the radar navigator, all of them, "Hey! We're drifting away from the main stream!" I had a command pilot on board. He sat on the right seat. And when I had a command pilot on board, I did not ever try to communicate outside of our aircraft. I was flying the aircraft, and I was talking to my crew, and the crew was saying "Hey, we're off course!"

Aaron Elson: Who was the command pilot?

Web Uebelhoer: Jim Graham.

Aaron Elson: And [Major Donald] McKoy, was he also a command pilot?

Web Uebelhoer: He was the command pilot on the lead ship.

Aaron Elson: And you had a command pilot on the deputy lead ship. Was your squadron leading the whole bomber stream, or were there other groups ahead of you?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh yes, there were other groups ahead of us.

Aaron Elson: So you were not the point for the whole mission.

Web Uebelhoer: No.

Aaron Elson: Now you heard the people on your plane could see that you were drifting away from the bomb group.

Web Uebelhoer: Slowly. To the left.

Aaron Elson: I've heard that some pilots radioed to McKoy.

Web Uebelhoer: That's right.

Aaron Elson: Did any of them contact you?

Web Uebelhoer: I don't know, because as I said, I strictly was local. I was concerned with my crew, and Jim Graham, whatever he was talking about, I don't know.

Aaron Elson: At what point was Goettingen ... how do you pronounce it?

Web Uebelhoer: Gottingen.

Aaron Elson: Was that predetermined as a secondary target?

Web Uebelhoer: No. We assumed, because there are not any of them living now, we assumed that McKoy and Chilton misidentified the target. I think they thought that they were bombing Kassel, and they were actually going toward Goettingen.

Aaron Elson: If it was a mistake, would it have been the fault of the radar navigator, or the pilot?

Web Uebelhoer: Not the pilot's.

Aaron Elson: The command pilot?

Web Uebelhoer: No. The mistake was made in navigation. In my opinion.

Aaron Elson: You had a 100 percent clouds? So you couldn't see visually.

Web Uebelhoer: That's right.

Aaron Elson: You dropped the bombs. And then what happened.

Web Uebelhoer: Well, the first thing - just to throw in a little information that might be of interest to you: I happened to glance down at the cloud cover, and do you know what "window" is, this tin foil that we'd throw out?

Aaron Elson: Chaff?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. Various ships in the formation had thrown that out. And we were someplace around 20,000 or 22,000 feet, and I looked down, and this chaff had completely fooled their radar. The explosions from antiaircraft guns were at least 5,000 feet below me and just blowing the hell out of this chaff.

Aaron Elson: When you saw this with the chaff, was that before the bombs were dropped or after?

Web Uebelhoer: That's before the bombs were dropped.

Aaron Elson: After you peeled away from the main formation, was there any antiaircraft fire?

Web Uebelhoer: Not that I was aware of.

Aaron Elson: What happened when you turned to head back to England?

Web Uebelhoer: I'm not sure of this but we made a left turn, I think. [We were supposed to be at] the reassembly point, where we tried to put the bomber stream back together. And we looked out, and we were thirty-some airplanes all alone. AND the fighter planes did not see us go. We had a conference the evening of that mission, and the fighter pilots, their leaders, were briefed - not briefed but questioned, "What in the hell were you guys doing?" Well, I don't know what they were doing, but they were not aware that we were drifting away from the bomber stream. So we were out there all by ourselves.

Aaron Elson: When you looked out, were you aware that you didn't have fighters with you?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. And that's not uncommon. Because I said that we were winning the damn war. And then my tail gunner, John Hubitz - he's dead now - called me on the interphone. "Captain, there's a hell of a lot of aircraft behind us!" And I thought they were our planes just playing around, because normally, in that

stage of the war, there were no Germans around. So I said, "John, keep your eye on them and keep me informed."

"Okay."

Then the next thing, the bursts from their cannon began to spot, and I was aware that those were not friendly fighters, those were bogeys.

Aaron Elson: And what did you think at the time?

Web Uebelhoer: Well, there training took over and you didn't. Coherent thinking, you didn't. I was almost in the lead of the formation because of the assigned position in the flight. I didn't see a whole hell of a lot. An FW-190 came across our right wing and kind of just positioned himself, and the nose turret - a .50-caliber machine gun is a large weapon - two .50-caliber machine guns, and the nose turret gunner in my aircraft was spraying them like a garden hose - and that's just about as far, closer than that ship [a cargo ship passing in the Savannah River, just outside the hotel], he just shot and shot and shot, and we found out later, the German aircraft, were heavily armored. Normally a 50-caliber machine gun just tears an airplane apart. But nothing happened. The left landing gear came down, and I don't know what the hell happened to him. Another one came across our left wing, and of course a fighter aircraft can fire just straight ahead. And he just sat there and looked at us, and we looked at him. Then he peeled off. But it's training. Fear, training. Training overcoming fear.

Aaron Elson: When did you see Chilton's plane get hit?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh yeah. Boy, and I really ... God ... about as far as that lightpost, I was flying that close to him.

Aaron Elson: That's maybe 50 feet?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. And McKoy was sitting in the right seat, so I was looking at McKoy. And I was also looking at the waist window. An FW-190 - all these attacks came from below - and hell, he was within 50 feet, this German. Kind of standing on his tail and almost stalling out. Just shot the hell out of that, I could see the gunners moving around in the ship, and the ship was full of - it had an orange appearance - and McKoy was doing something, signaling me but I didn't know what [he was trying to communicate], and very shortly after that he lost control. He

rolled to the left, and down. I saw some guys get out of the plane. Four or five people. That's the end of that. Now in the meantime, okay, the lead ship's shot down so I'm the leader. The guy who was flying on me, he was on fire. I don't know what happened to him. But pretty soon we became aware that four or five or six airplanes were all that was left, and boy, four P-38s - that's our fighter aircraft - came right over the top of us and we realized the cavalry had arrived, and we were relatively safe.

Aaron Elson: Did you at any point think like you were waiting for the kill to come in?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. I didn't really until ... and I don't know what happened to my crew, but when all this was going on, our crew wasn't in the fight. And I got on the interphone and I chewed those guys out, "Hey, let's get in this fight!" And my God, I think every weapon on that ship was firing. And then, that's when the P-38s came across.

Aaron Elson: Did they ever say why they had held back?

Web Uebelhoer: No. I didn't ask them and they didn't tell me.

Aaron Elson: Did your ship sustain damage?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. You're aware, I think, that these gas tanks were rubber-lined?

Aaron Elson: No, I wasn't.

Web Uebelhoer: That's right. They were. Gas tanks and the oil reservoir were rubber lined, and some sort of a weapon fired through the No. 2 engine - I didn't realize this happened until I got back down on the ground - some sort of a projectile, not explosive, went through that oil reservoir and that sealed itself. That engine was working. So that was all the damage that I had. And of three other airplanes [that returned to Tibenham], I think just one airplane got back with no damage.

Aaron Elson: Did any of them have communication with you, or were their radios out?

Web Uebelhoer: That's a very good question, because I thought, hey, four or five airplanes, what the hell, let's get in formation and at least give our fighters something to fight about. I guess I had Jim Graham try to call these guys and get them in there, but they didn't do it. And I don't know why.

Aaron Elson: While this was all going on, what was Graham's reaction? Did he say anything or do anything?

Web Uebelhoer: I didn't pay much attention to him. I can't really know what he was doing. I'm sure he was doing his job, I don't mean to imply that. But I don't know what he was doing.

Aaron Elson: So you didn't even have to crash-land. You made it back all right?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh yeah. I taxied into the hardstand and somebody later said, "Hey, you got shot." That's the word I had on it.

Aaron Elson: Did your plane have a name?

Web Uebelhoer: No. As a matter of fact, I didn't have a plane. "Yours is in hardstand 45, Uebelhoer. You're gonna fly that today and your position is deputy lead." No name. I never had a name for a plane.

Aaron Elson: Did you fly more missions after Kassel?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. I had the feeling - entirely unsubstantiated - that I ran away from the fight. Because that really happened. God protected me and three others, and this was my 18th mission I believe. And Martha Miner, Reg Miner's wife who has since passed away, we were talking about this mission, and I expressed my feeling that I chickened out and ran, and she said, "Hell. The guys who parachuted, the war was over for them, and you had 12 more missions to go." Well, I didn't look at it like that until Martha had made that remark, that I still had 12 more missions to go.

Aaron Elson: What could you have done if you hadn't left?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, hell. Nothing.

Aaron Elson: What was the mood at the base that night?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, God. It was so confusing. You know, when an aircraft was shot down, the ground personnel came in and got their personal effects and sent them home I guess. And they came into our barracks, they were gonna take my stuff and send it home! And, well, Jimmy Stewart was no longer assigned to the 445th, but he was aware that something had happened and he drove to the base. I don't know where he was assigned. And when I got out of the briefing room, about 10 or 12 people were standing around, "Hey, Uebelhoer, we want to talk to you. What the hell happened?" And I talked to them the same as I'm talking to you. And while I was talking to them, Jimmy Stewart - my God, that's a big movie star - and he did not try to take over. He stood on the outer edge and listened intently. And I think that he almost became ill listening to what had happened. And of course I was watching him because he was a big movie star. He didn't ask a question. He listened.

Aaron Elson: Was your crew being questioned also? Who else was at this debriefing? Was it a debriefing?

Web Uebelhoer: I don't really remember, and I can't understand myself. I don't remember this debriefing, but I know I was there because then when I stepped out of the building these 12 people were there. So the real debriefing then, Colonel Jones, the commanding officer from our outfit, said, "Uebelhoer, get your crew together," and we drove over to some other airfield, and these fighter pilots, and all the brass [were there]. What the hell happened? Blah blah blah blah. My God, I never saw so many generals in all my life. They asked questions just like anybody else. What happened? What did you do? And blah blah blah. I remember that debriefing more than the debriefing that happened immediately after the mission.

Aaron Elson: What was the mood like at the mess hall? Did you eat that night?

Web Uebelhoer: I think I did. Everybody was completely, including my own crew, What the hell happened? We fought half of our missions and we didn't even see a fighter airplane. And the judgment, and I believe it was correct, 100 to 150 aircraft attacked us. And absolute lack of understanding. Questions. Answers inconclusive. It was a mess.

Aaron Elson: When did you fly next?

Web Uebelhoer: I think, probably in about five days. We went back to Kassel. And boy, those fighter pilots made damn sure that they protected us this time! I'm sure the flak came up, I don't know whether we lost any ships because of flak, but, well, we all came back.

Aaron Elson: Were you more scared after Kassel than you were before?

Web Uebelhoer: I don't know if you could say that, because I was always afraid, and to put a degree of fear, I don't know if I could do that.

Aaron Elson: Did you have a good luck charm?

Web Uebelhoer: No.

Aaron Elson: You weren't superstitious at all?

Web Uebelhoer: I did a lot of praying. And I can remember, you know, sitting here with the controls, there was aluminum sheeting, that's all that protected me from whatever, and I prayed to God that if I got it, Bam! Just wipe me out, don't tear my eye out or something like that. I don't suppose I was superstitious at all.

Aaron Elson: You flew 30 missions?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes.

Aaron Elson: What did you do on your last mission?

Web Uebelhoer: Got drunk as...yeah ... oh boy. My whole crew got together and bottles of whiskey appeared, and we just got damn good and drunk.

Aaron Elson: Did you lose anybody on the Kassel mission who you were particularly close to?

Web Uebelhoer: No, and that is a very penetrating question. People were coming and going. Coming and getting shot down. Coming and completing their missions. You didn't - and I've talked to several fellows and I've verified this - you didn't have a buddy outside of the crew because they might be here one day and gone the next. It was that type of combat. And incidentally, the German aircraft were pretty well swept from the skies, but their antiaircraft fire was becoming more and more accurate. And talk about fear, I don't think I was afraid as much of the German

fighter pilot, because I'm sure I'd say he's scared too. But the guy firing, he's not scared. He's twisting his dials and all that stuff, and that really scared me.

Aaron Elson: You must have seen a lot of planes get hit by flak.

Web Uebelhoer: And we got hit too, yes.

Aaron Elson: When did that happen? Several times?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes. It was not uncommon. I probably came home from maybe a half a dozen missions, and I'm guessing, with three engines flying.

Aaron Elson: Did you ever lose hydraulics or landing gear?

Web Uebelhoer: No. We were always very fortunate. It was engines that were failing and hit.

Aaron Elson: It must be tough to fly with three engines.

Web Uebelhoer: You bet. I've had both of my hips replaced, and when you fly a B-24, let's say you've got one engine flying here, the aircraft tends to turn into the bad engine, and you get on that rudder. I think this contributed to my hip replacement, the B-24, I'll say it this way: The B-17 was a hell of a lot better aircraft than the B-24. We could fly five miles an hour faster. We carried considerably more bombs. But the B-17 was much better.

Aaron Elson: What did you do after the war?

Web Uebelhoer: I signed on with Pan American Airways, and I was a student pilot with Pan American, and in their examination, I became aware that I was losing my hearing, and I knew that they would eliminate me from their program. This was in New York. I was flying out of LaGuardia. And I resigned, and came back to Fort Wayne, Indiana, took a job with the telephone company, and the last 20 years of my working life I was a schoolteacher. I taught the sixth grade. I got a lot of satisfaction out of that.

Aaron Elson: What made you go into teaching?

Web Uebelhoer: Well, when I was thinking of my situation and my hearing was going bad, I tried to assess, what do I have to offer? And I think I did a pretty good

job that year of instructing pilots, and I liked it. So I went back to school then in Fort Wayne to a small college and got a teacher's license.

Aaron Elson: Did your students ever get you talking about the war?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, yes. I had models of the B-24, and German fighter aircraft.

Aaron Elson: What school did you teach in?

Web Uebelhoer: Well, it's Fort Wayne Community Schools, you don't know the Fort Wayne area, do you? It was Haley School, a beautiful school, and it was an affluent society, doctors, lawyers.

Aaron Elson: Do you have children?

Web Uebelhoer: Yes, I have three of them. Two of them are here with me now. My wife.

Aaron Elson: Did you have any children while you were overseas?

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, no. We didn't have any children until I got back.

Aaron Elson: After the Kassel mission, do you have any recollection of the time when one of the planes from the 445th went to Ireland to pick up - they were delivering planes to Ireland - and on the way back they had 24 people in one B-24 and it blew up?

Web Uebelhoer: Yeah, I heard of that. Why do you ask that?

Aaron Elson: George Noorigian had told me about that, because he almost was going to go on that flight.

Web Uebelhoer: Well, it was rather common to lose aircraft for various reasons, so yeah, I think I vaguely remember something about that. But in assembly, you know, trying to fly, a couple of them come together, explode. This was a way of life. There was so much of that going on.

Aaron Elson: That must be an awful thing to see.

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, yes. Just one thing. Twelve aircraft and twelve aircraft. I was flying the lead ship in these twelve aircraft, and my formation was always overriding, and the way you do it, you don't chop your throttles, you dogleg back and forth across them. They were out of position. One of the ships in this squadron and in my squadron came together over the North Sea. This is unbelievable but it's true. The wingtip of the ship in my squadron clipped the nose turret right out of the airplane and down it went. Not the airplane. [Just the nose turret.] And I was sick. Oh, my God. The boys in the back of the aircraft, I said, "Keep your eye on it. I hope the guy gets out." He didn't. Both airplanes got back to the field. And the guy, the gunner, had left his position to urinate; we would walk out on the bomb bay door and urinate on the bomb bay door. And he escaped. I talked to the guy. I said, "What in the hell happened?" He was peeing.

Aaron Elson: You're what, 82 now did you say?

Web Uebelhoer: Eighty-two.

Aaron Elson: You've seen quite a bit.

Web Uebelhoer: Oh, yeah. I've seen quite a bit, but did you see "Saving Private Ryan"? Oh, my. I at least, when I went to bed at night the damn nissen hut was cold but it was dry, and I would pile eight blankets on me and I could sleep.

Aaron Elson: Did you know Captain Steinbacher? He was an original member and he did a second tour, and then he went into fighter planes and was killed.

Web Uebelhoer: No, I didn't know him. By the way, I completed my tour of duty and I didn't want to go home because I would be transferred into Japan to bomb there and I'd had my fill, so I stayed on as a briefing officer. Colonel Jones called me into his office when I had completed my tour of duty - one day, during my flying, he rode with me as command pilot - and he called me into his office and said, "Uebelhoer. I'm going to make you a squadron commander of one of my four squadrons." Oh, boy, that's a promotion! "Yeah, you'll be promoted." And then my brain began to work. I was not being shot at. And I think it's a good rule, guys directing fighting in an airplane must be actively engaged themselves. So this would put me right back in, and I said, "Thanks but no thanks."

Aaron Elson: Did you smoke during the war?

Web Uebelhoer: No. Why do you ask that?

Aaron Elson: Because it was such an important part of military life.

Web Uebelhoer: Okay. The reason I ask you that, you know, we [got rations of] candy bars, cigarettes, cigars. I always went down to the BX and got my full ration. And I piled that stuff up, especially the cigarettes. Cigarettes were better than money. And cigars. And near the end of the war, when we had pushed the Germans way back into Germany, some of the ground personnel talked Colonel Jones into bomb assessment. I gave one of them my treasure trove of cigarettes and cigars, and I said, "I want a good German luger." Boy, I've got one. A beautiful weapon. I've got the complete holster and the whole shmear. For a box of cigars. But no, I didn't smoke. You know, we're children of the Depression, and before the war started, when I was a college student, I was so damn poor that it was a financial decision. Cigarettes are ten cents a pack. I didn't smoke because I didn't want to spend the money.

Aaron Elson: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Web Uebelhoer: Two brothers. No sisters.

Aaron Elson: What had your father done?

Web Uebelhoer: He was a printer. I think he called it a compositor. Lead forms, are you familiar with that? The lead form, I guess it was sort of an art to do news items and ads and so forth, that's the type of work he did.

Aaron Elson: And he was out of work during the Depression?

Web Uebelhoer: No. He didn't lose a day's work.

Aaron Elson: He just didn't get paid much?

Web Uebelhoer: That's right. Well, and that's unfortunate. Somebody had told him that printers drank a lot. He became an alcoholic. When I was being raised, I have some very fine memories of my father. We did a lot of camping up around the shores of Lake Michigan and that type of thing. And he was a great guy. But whiskey got him. He died when I was overseas. He was 54 years old, and he died.

Aaron Elson: How did he die?

Web Uebelhoer: I suppose an overdose of alcohol. I don't know.

Aaron Elson: How did they notify you?

Web Uebelhoer: Very poorly. My wife finally got a message through to me that Dad had died. But the message was slow in coming.

Aaron Elson: Did you learn that before the Kassel mission or after?

Web Uebelhoer: I really don't know. I was, you know, I was confused myself, as I say, as a small child I have some wonderful memories of my Dad, but he practically ruined the family.

Aaron Elson: Coming from a poor family, how did you get into college? How did you pay for it?

Web Uebelhoer: Ahh, good question. My brother, two and a half years older than I, was killed in an automobile accident in Chicago. Do you know what a double indemnity insurance policy is? My father had taken out a double indemnity insurance policy, and I don't know how in the world I convinced him to use that to finance me through college, because if he'd been left alone he'd have drank it. But that's the way I got to go to college.