

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Dr. Lewis A. Smith

Date of Interview: October 3, 2012

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Mr. Cox: This is Floyd Cox. I'm a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War. Today is October third, 2012. I'm interviewing Mr. Lew Smith. The interview is taking place in the Crown Plaza Hotel in San Antonio, Texas. They are having a reunion of the Eighth Air Force Historical Society and that's the reason we're here. The interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center, National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. To start off with, Lew, I want to shake your hand and say thank you for what you did for me, as an American citizen.

Dr. Smith: It's my honor, sir.

Mr. Cox: Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where you were born, when you were born, and we'll just take it from there.

Dr. Smith: All righty. I'm delighted to be here, by the way. Thank you for asking me, Floyd. I appreciate. I was born in Wichita, Kansas in 1924. January the tenth. That means this next January I'm going to be entering my ninetieth year.

Mr. Cox: Happy birthday! Early.

Dr. Smith: Thank you. I went to school there. High school and grade school in Wichita.

Mr. Cox: What high school in Wichita?

Dr. Smith: Wichita North High. Let me tell you a story about Wichita North High. One of my buddies was a young fella by the name of Tommy McConnell. Have you ever heard of McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita?

Mr. Cox: Yes.

Dr. Smith: Well, that was named after the McConnell brothers. There were three of them and they all went to Wichita North High, same time as I did. Tommy was a personal friend of mine. And when the war started, they went down and enlisted, went through training together, flight training together, and learned to fly B-24, four-engine bombers. And then they were sent together to the Pacific to fight the war. Tommy lost his life on his fourth mission and Fred, the older brother, also was killed during the war. So we honor their memory with McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas. And there was a young fella, one class ahead of me at Wichita North High. His name was Jimmy Jabara. Are you familiar with his name?

Mr. Cox: Oh, you bet! Fighter ace!

Dr. Smith: Absolutely. He was America's first fighter ace. Now he joined right after Pearl Harbor, learned to fly P-51 Mustang fighter and went to England and fought the war there. He's credited with shooting down two German MIGs, not MIGs, Messerschmitt. But after the war, he stayed in the air force and when the Korean War came along, he was flying jets. It was there that Jimmy Jabara became America's first jet ace. He shot down five MIG-15s. Actually, before the war was over, he was a triple ace, shooting down fifteen MIGs. He became full colonel and the word was out that it wasn't going to be too long

before he was going to be the youngest general in the air force. In 1966 he was killed in an automobile accident in Florida. We honor his memory with Jabara Air Base, not air base but airport, Jabara Airport in Wichita, Kansas. Okay, where were we?

Mr. Cox: Back to when you were in high school. Tell me your mother and dad's name and what they did for a living.

Dr. Smith: My dad was Frank Andrew Smith and he was a sales manager of the Wichita Flour mills there in town. My mother was one of the founders of the Quaker church in Wichita. The war started soon after I graduated high school, so I went down and enlisted right away. They sent me through a bunch of tests and then said, "Okay, we want you. BUT, you're only seventeen. We can't have you until you're eighteen." So I had to go home for a year. Following the rejection, I attended Friends University and started my pre-optometry work there. And then in a year, they called me up. I went into the service and went through flight training and learned how to fly three different planes there.

Mr. Cox: Okay, where'd you go through flight training?

Dr. Smith: Flight training? Well, my basic training was at Jefferson Barracks. The only thing you learn there is how to march. (laughter) It was miserable weather. Ice cold, living in tents. It was horrible. Then they sent you to College Training Detachment in St. Paul, Minnesota for three months. Following that, I went out to Santa Anna where they decide if you're going to be a pilot or bombardier, navigator. I went through training there and then they sent me to

Dos Palos for primary training. We flew PT-23s there. I then went to Bakersfield, California (Minter Field) for basic flight training where I flew BT-13s. Following that I was sent to Pecos, Texas for Advanced Flight Training where I flew twin-engine Cessnas, UC-78s.

Mr. Cox: Oh, Pecos.

Dr. Smith: That's the end of the world out there, let me tell you. Then we went to Roswell, New Mexico for four-engine B-17 training. And then three months in Rapid City, South Dakota to put the crews together, to get to know each other and learn to work together.

Mr. Cox: What was your rank at this time?

Dr. Smith: When I got my wings down at Pecos, I was a second lieutenant. After that three months in Rapid City, they sent us to Nebraska, Omaha and we picked up a brand new B-17 right off the assembly line. They had this sign posted that says, "If you break it you buy it" and it was \$300,000.00 at that time. (laughter) And they said, "Fly to England. It's that-a-way." So we took off for England. It's very interesting flying over the north Atlantic in the winter time and you knew you had to start talking sweet stuff to your engines because if you went down in that north Atlantic, that would be about the end of it. You would fly a beam sent from Scotland and you'd fly that beam across the north Atlantic. The Germans would send a false beam from way up north to try to get you to go to the North Pole. So you had to learn to tell the difference between the two. When we arrived in Scotland, they sent us on to England and went to the 385th Bomb Group at Great Ashfield, station 155.

It's about ninety miles north of London. I was there about six months, flew thirty-five missions.

Mr. Cox: Now, tell me about your first mission. I imagine you can remember your first mission.

Dr. Smith: Well, no. (laughter) No actually, I was trying to think of the name of where we went but I do remember the first one. The first two missions, a new pilot always flies as copilot with an experienced crew. So I flew with other crews those first two missions. So they weren't near as memorable as if you're flying with your main crew. But the first two missions weren't bad. When I was flying, it was later in the war, and fighter attacks weren't too bad at that time. During only about a third of our missions did we have fighter attacks. But the flak was really horrible. They brought back all the guns, as many as they could, from the eastern front, since they were pushed out of Russia and put them around Berlin and Merseburg and Hamburg and all the big cities. Consequently flak was a real serious problem. Several times I came home with over a hundred holes in the airplane.

Mr. Cox: During any of your missions, did any of your crew get injured?

Dr. Smith: Not injured, they got hit. Of course, we wore flak suits that covered your chest and body and helmets over the target and all my gunners were hit by flak. But those flak suits stopped them; none of them were really injured. The bombardier and navigator were, of course, up in the nose and my bombardier got a face full of plastic a couple of times. From bullets that shattered the plastic. There are many, many war stories I could tell you.

Mr. Cox: Well certainly, tell them.

Dr. Smith: The greatest mission I flew was in December, 1944. And it was a horrible winter; it was just snow, ice cold. At this time, the front, the western front was just a little bit outside Germany. We had four divisions up there and all were dug in trying to keep from freezing. And a lot of them were inexperienced people. Well, Germany knew they were losing the war, so they had to do something. Hitler decided on a surprise attack. He managed to gather twenty divisions along the border with Luxembourg and Belgium. Nine of these divisions had Panzer tanks. Their plan was a surprise attack: drive through Belgium to the port of Antwerp where they could get supplies and be able to continue the war. On the sixteen of December, they came across. This is the Battle of the Bulge, of course. We took more losses in that battle than any other battle of the war. Something like 80,000 of our troops were either killed, injured or captured. They just ran over our four divisions.

Mr. Cox: And you guys couldn't get off the ground, at that time.

Dr. Smith: Yeah, we really couldn't. At first, the headquarters thought, well, it's just a probe, and they'll go two or three miles and pull back. Well, the second day they were ten miles in. The third day they were about fifteen miles in, close to the crossroads town of Bastogne. Headquarters finally said, "Hey, we've got to do something about that." So they called all the generals in and asked them who could send some help up there. We gotta have some reinforcements. Of course, the only one that said he could was, (pause) General Patton. He's my favorite general. His motto was, "Haul ass and bypass." (laughter) By gosh,

that's what he did. Anyway, he said, "Yeah, I can get some people up there but it's going to take a few days." They also said, of course, "Send the Air Force out." Well, they had waited to start this drive until a severe arctic front was coming down. The weather was just stinking, just solid clouds. On the nineteenth of December, they got us up at three o'clock, went to the briefing for two hours, went out to the airplane and sat for five hours, hoping the weather would break so we could take off and help these poor guys who were getting massacred over there. But they had to scrub the mission, they just couldn't get off. They did the same thing on the twentieth and twenty-first. On the twenty-second and twenty-third, the weather was so lousy, just 30,000 feet solid clouds down to the ground. They didn't even get us up. But finally, on the twenty-fourth of December, the day before Christmas, 1944, the weather broke and the greatest air armada the world has ever known and probably ever will know, took off. There were 2,038 bombers and 934 fighters in the air. The bomber stream was over 300 miles long. It took two hours to pass one point on the ground. There were forty bomber groups from England over there and our particular group was the second one in line. That day the bomber stream was led by General Cassel. He was in the first group, we were the second group. Each group put up about thirty six planes, thirty-six B-17s. And as we approached Germany, we saw about forty-five or fifty fighters hit that first group. Among these fighters, there were eight or ten of the German jets, Messerschmitt 262. We didn't have anything to match it. It was seventy-five miles faster than anything we had, and it was armed with four

30mm cannons. So it was deadly to us and a real serious problem. Anyway, about forty-five hit that first group and in about five minutes, eight B-17s either blew up or went down in flames. Of course, they always try to get the leader first. Flak knocked out two engines of Cassel's plane and he had to fall out of formation. As soon as you fall out of formation, the fighters are all over you, like bees on a hive. Well, he did manage to level off about 10,000 feet and four of his ten crew got out before the plane exploded. We figured they were coming after us next, since we were next in line. But fortunately for us, they went after the third group and worked on them for about five minutes and downed four B-17s there. Then they did come after us. But two things happened. First of all, the jets couldn't stay up in the air too long so they had to go back and refuel. Secondly, our P-47s and P-51s, fighter escorts, finally arrived and man, it was a real wing-ding. I mean, there were dogfights all over the sky. Where ever you looked there were planes on fire, pilots jumping out in chutes, bombers going down. Four Messerschmitts came right through our formation with four P-52s right on their tail. They got up about eleven o'clock and one Messerschmitt exploded so we were flying through pieces of airplane. We hit some of it but it didn't take any of us down. Anyway, I looked up ahead and saw two fighter planes, American and German fighter planes, a Messerschmitt and a P-51 collide. Both pilots jumped out, their chutes opened, and along came another Messerschmitt and machine gunned the American pilot. First time I ever saw that. Usually they didn't do that. Well, finally our guys chased them away, after we lost three B-

17s. We went on and bombed the jet airfield at Gross-ostheim, Germany and took our lumps and got back home. But, as you can imagine, with 2,000 bombers in the air, we began to affect the drive of the Germans. And of course, the 936 fighter planes went after the tanks and anything that moved on the road. We really began to slow them down. Then Patton had brought up a couple of Corps of his Third Army and relieved the battered bastards of Bastogne. That pretty much began the end of the Battle of the Bulge. That was the biggest air fight I was ever in. I was in a number of battles, but that was the biggest I ever flew in. There were 2,034 bombers, can you imagine? That will never happen again.

Mr. Cox: Oh my goodness. They were probably taking off from bases all over England.

Dr. Smith: All over England. Absolutely. That reminds me of another thing, too. There were forty bases, bomber bases, in an area about the size of the state of Colorado. In this area, there were 700 airfields and over 10,000 airplanes. So mid-air collisions were a real, real problem. Now, on to other stories? I've got a million. (laughter)

Mr. Cox: Well, certainly. Tell me, were you in any, how should I say this, any famous bombings, you know, those that made big headlines?

Dr. Smith: Those that made headlines were, of course, Berlin. I went there three times. Berlin was a horrible target because there were six or seven hundred anti-aircraft guns there. When you're approaching Berlin, you could just see a grey cloud from the anti-aircraft fire. The last time I went--

Mr. Cox: Excuse me, when you see these clouds, you know you're going to have to fly right through them, aren't you.

Dr. Smith: And the thing is, you're usually on your bomb run, so you have to fly straight and narrow as you can. Of course, with the flak going off, the anti-aircraft going off around you, you're bouncing around anyway. But you gotta go straight and narrow. Of course, lots of times the Germans just wait until they see you start flying straight or they see the bomb doors open and then they could really start hitting you.

Mr. Cox: How'd you feel the first time you flew through one of these flak attacks? Do you remember, as a young man?

Dr. Smith: Yeah, it scared the hell out of me. (laughter)

Mr. Cox: That's what I thought. It'd be strange if you didn't.

Dr. Smith: You were always scared. But you gotta remember this, at nineteen years old, which is what I was, you think you're indestructible. Young men fight wars. Old guys don't do so good. Let me tell you. When I think back on what we did then, I cannot comprehend how we could have possibly done it with the losses that we were suffering. But this was the twenty-first of March, 1945, we went to Berlin and I was breaking in a new pilot. I mentioned before that a new pilot flies with an old pilot with experience. I was breaking in a new pilot. My copilot was flying on my wing, my left wing with another crew. I was leading six B-17s that day. When we went into this cloud over Berlin on the bomb run, both of my wingmen were in position. Of course, over the target, trying to hold things straight and everything, you can't pay any

attention to your wingmen for you are focusing on flying the airplane. But when we got out of the mess there, when you drop your bombs, you usually take a real quick turn to the left and drop about 500 foot and we did that. I looked around and neither one of my wingmen were there. I didn't know what had happened, but later on I found out that the right wingman had exploded over the target, nobody got out. The left wingman, with my copilot in it, lost two engines right away and fell out of formation and the fighters went after them. They finally got in some cloud cover, at about 7,000 feet. Otherwise they certainly would have been shot down, but they were only on two engines and when they came out of the clouds, (Oh, by the way, the Russian lines were only about fifty miles to the east.) they knew they couldn't make it back home to England so they headed for the Russian lines. When they came out of the clouds, they were right on the ground so all they could do was go in and they crash landed. One guy was killed and one guy lost his arm but the other eight were banged up but alive. The Polish and Russian officers took them over and eventually, after a long, long trip, they finally got back to Great Ashfield. Seventy days it took them. By the time they got back, I'd finished my missions and gone home so I never saw my copilot again. We send Christmas cards and things like that. We had a reunion, the Eighth Air Force did in 2009, in Cincinnati and my copilot lives in Springfield, Ohio. So I went up to Springfield, Ohio to see him. It was the first time I saw him for sixty-five years. Of course, I asked him where the hell he'd been? (laughter) But we had a great visit and caught up on old times. So that was nice. Berlin was

the toughest, one of the toughest targets. Merseburg, again, it was an oil refinery and they defended it voraciously. One time we went there and lost fifty-six bombers that day.

Mr. Cox: Wow.

Dr. Smith: I forgot how many were in the air. Hanover was kind of a rough target. Frankfort was tough, uh, so there were a number of very difficult targets.

Mr. Cox: Did you have the same crew all the time you were over there?

Dr. Smith: Most of the time I did. We kept pretty well together. They pulled me into headquarters after I'd flown thirteen or fourteen missions and wanted me to take over and become a lead crew and ride a desk part-time. I decided to do it because you get a promotion to Captaincy. I lasted three weeks. I couldn't take it because you only get to fly maybe once every two weeks and I could see it was going to take forever to get my missions in and I don't like sitting at a desk anyway. I was training officer. I set up the training. All the time, of course, you're continually training, flying training flights over England. I set up those schedules and flew with some guys and checked out new pilots and that kind of stuff. So I told them, "Hey, this is not for me. I want to go back to flying." I got most of my crew back then and finished up with most of my crew.

Mr. Cox: So it was boring. You wanted to get back there where the flak--

Dr. Smith: I wanted to get back to being shot at. (laughter)

Mr. Cox: Well, did you make Captain?

Dr. Smith: Yeah. I got my Captaincy.

Mr. Cox: Good.

Dr. Smith: I gotta tell you another story. It's a little dicey but it's not bad. On November seventh, 1944 we were going to Hamburg. There was an oil refinery there. The air was just horrible. We were just bouncing all around. Trying to fly formation in that air is really nasty. All of a sudden, we hit a down draft and dropped about thirty feet. We've got these big ammunition cases, wooden boxes full of 600 rounds of 50 caliber ammunition. Well of course, everything that wasn't tied down, hit the ceiling and came back down. If one of those hit you, you could easily break an arm or leg or something. So of course, I said immediately, "Pilot to crew. Pilot to crew. Is everybody okay? Check in please." (Ten man crew) And one by one every station checked in except the tail gunner. Now our tail gunner, Howard Howdershell by name. He was from Maryland. Kind of a little bit backwoodsy and a little bit wet behind the ears but he was a neat guy. The guys teased him quite a bit but he took it well and came right back at them. So we really liked him and we could depend on him. So I said, "Howdy?" We called him Howdy. I said, "Howdy, you okay back there?" And I didn't hear anything. Pretty soon his intercom clicked on and his voice is kind of shaky and he says, "Skipper, I have a little problem. It's kind of embarrassing." He says, "When we hit that last bump, I was using the relief tube." Now the relief tube back then was a hose with a funnel that went out the bottom of the airplane. And he said, "And now, an extremely important part of my anatomy is stuck to the gun barrel." (laughter) Well you can imagine what came over the intercom. Whimsical suggestions,

rude comments and unprintable advice. I said, "Come on, guys. Quiet down now. We've got a problem here." I said, "Howdy, you're going to have to warm those barrels up. You're going to have to shoot off a few rounds." He says, "Skipper! (in a high pitched voice) The recoil on those twin 50s!" (laughter) I said, "Howdy, I know, but unless you do it, you're going to be stuck for the duration and not only that but you're going to be quick frozen." You could hear him mumbling and swearing. I said, "And by the way, when you do it, the rest of the formation would appreciate it if you didn't shoot any of them down." Pretty soon, we felt the back end shaking as he shot his twin 50s off and then it was quiet. No response. So I said, "Howdy?" And again he clicked on his intercom and he says, "Skipper, mission accomplished. Me and my manhood are again one, bloodied but unbowed." I said, "Well, thank goodness Howdy." I said, "Listen, I'll send Tom back, we've got some sulfa drug in the medic...." He says, "Not on your life, Skipper! Some things are sacred!" I said, "Okay, Howdy. Okay." So we went ahead and bombed Hamburg, took our lumps, got our holes and went back home. Well, I thought, "We'll just give Howdy the full treatment." Anytime you have wounded aboard, you shoot a red flare and you get to come right on in, for a priority landing. We shot the flare, went on in on the runway, pulled quickly off to the side. The ambulance (meat wagon) was there. Two waste gunners jumped out real fast and made like they were helping him out of the plane. Made him lay down on the stretcher there and of course, the medics were looking and scratching their head 'cause they couldn't see any blood and he

wouldn't tell them where he was hurt. Well, they took him to the hospital, treated him for a few days and he finally returned to base and finished his missions. But he refused to fill out applications for a Purple Heart because he was afraid somebody would ask him, "How." (laughter) There were good stories too.

Mr. Cox: (laughter) Certainly. Well, all you fellas in combat, it's hell but there's still some light moments.

Dr. Smith: You had to keep it light or you went crazy.

Mr. Cox: But that would have been something. Why were you awarded the Purple Heart? Well, I... (laughter) Oh, that's a wonderful story.

Dr. Smith: Another story or have you had enough?

Mr. Cox: Oh no sir. That's what this is all about.

Dr. Smith: Well, first of March, we were going to Ulum to bomb a tank factory in 1945. I was leading the lower section of the squadron. When you fly, each group would have three squadrons, twelve in each squadron. High squadron, lead squadron and low squadron. I was usually in low squadron, leading six planes. When you're leading planes like that, I'd keep my engineer, who was my top turret gunner, I'd keep him up in the top turret to watch the other airplanes, make sure everybody's keeping up and nobody's having trouble. Well, we were just crossing the Channel and we were just barely over Belgium and my engineer says, "Look up! Look up!" Well, we looked up to the top twelve planes and up there; one bomber had pulled suddenly up into another and cut quite a bit of the tail off the top airplane. Of course, pieces of

airplane were flying everywhere with both planes going down. These two crews were from our barracks, by the way. The tail gunner in the top plane, where the tail was cut off, his name was Joe Jones. And of course, he knew that something had happened, but we weren't having any enemy action at the time so he figured it must have been some kind of mid-air collision. So he grabbed the interphones, you know, "Tail to pilot. Tail to pilot." Of course, no answer. He did it again and no answer so he looked up towards the front. All he could see was a mass of jumbled metal. They've got a little escape door back there so he pulled himself up to it and tried to get it open but it was jammed horribly. He kicked it and swore at it but he couldn't get it open. So he crawled back to the tail, sit down on his little pallet there and lit a cigarette. He remembered his mother told him, "Join the navy 'cause you can swim but you can't fly." He rode the tail section down from 13,000 feet. Now that tail on B-17s is probably twenty foot across and there's quite a bit of surface so they kind of fluttered down like this. The tail landed in a farmer's plowed field and the farmer came running out and he saw that there was somebody in there but he had to go back to the house to get an axe to chop him out of the tail. Chopped him out of the tail, got him to a British hospital and about four or five days later he woke up. Of course he had a concussion. No broken bones but he had a lot of bruises and a badly cut tongue and so they kept him a couple of weeks in the hospital and then sent him home to our base. Of course they said, "Well, buddy. Your flying days are over." (laughter) His story was in Ripley's Believe or Not. Have you heard of that?

Mr. Cox: No, I had not. Now, the rest of the crew, did they perish?

Dr. Smith: They all died, all nineteen. He was the only one that got out.

Mr. Cox: My goodness.

Dr. Smith: So it was a sad day in our barracks. Another interesting thing. The copilot on that crew, the pilot's name (the upper crew), the one that was crashed into was Armbruster. The copilot was Howard Muchow. He and I were quite close. He had a sinus infection that day. You can't fly with a sinus infection 'cause these are unpressurized airplanes. So he lived, out of the crew, but he and the tail gunner were the only two that survived. I saw Joe Jones in Tulsa in 1992 at a reunion but he passed away since. I speak to church groups and optimist clubs and rotary and school kids quite often. Lots of time they'll ask you, "What was it like flying B-17s?" I tell them, "Well, imagine. You're five miles up in the air. You're in a tube with an eight-foot diameter and it's an aluminum tube and aluminum is of such a thickness that you can take a screwdriver and just with moderate force, punch a hole in it. The temperature up there is around minus forty-five, fifty degrees below zero. So you had to wear, first of all, long johns, electric suit, flight suit, Mae West flight jacket, flak suit, earphones, oxygen mask and Fleece boots. We wore a helmet over the target. In your wings were 2,800 gallons of hundred octane gasoline, in your bomb bay was 6,000 pounds of high explosives. These unfriendly people on the ground were shooting these 88mm and 105mm cannons at you. You could see these shells bursting around you and you could hear, almost hear the shrapnel. When one of those shells burst, hundreds of pieces of metal

fly out and make holes. And these nasty fighter planes would fly through your formation shooting 50 caliber machine gun bullets and air-to-air missiles too. Hey, nothing to it! Piece of cake.” (laughter)

Mr. Cox: It was quite an experience. But as you said, the young people today know little of what went on during World War II.

Dr. Smith: It's something. You know, I was proud to do it. I was lucky enough to survive. The losses in the Eighth Air Force were higher than any other group in the war. Even higher than the marines. The navy lost about one percent, the army lost about two percent, the marines about three percent. The Eighth Air Force, including the ground personnel, lost seven percent. If you include just the flight personnel it gets up about nineteen or twenty percent. The average life of a B-17, in our particular group, was four months and twelve days. And the average life of the crew was fifteen missions.

Mr. Cox: You flew thirty?

Dr. Smith: Thirty-five. Early in the war, you only had to fly twenty-five missions. But fighter attacks were much more prevalent. Early, our major problem was that our fighter protection couldn't go as far as the bombers. They didn't have the range. So they'd only go about half way, then they'd have to go back. Of course, the Germans would just simply wait until the fighters left and then they'd tear the heck out of us. Fortunately, late in 1943, the P-51 came out with longer range. And somebody finally come up with the idea of putting drop tanks on all our fighters so they could go almost all the way. So the losses were cut down a lot from fighter attack. The flak got worse but the

fighters were less. So the percentages were better toward the last of the war when I was flying.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this. Did you have a name for your airplane like a lot of them?

Dr. Smith: I flew eight different airplanes because I kept bringing them back broken. (laughter) I flew one called Rum Dum. I have a beautiful flight jacket. I just got it fixed up about ten years ago. And it's got a painted picture of Rum Dum on the back. It was the first plane in the European Theater of Operations to make a hundred missions without an abort. I flew it on the hundredth mission. I've got some pictures of it. I also flew Mr. Lucky and I flew Purple Shaft. Well, as I say, I flew eight different ones.

Mr. Cox: Now let me ask you this. Did each plane have different characteristics in flying?

Dr. Smith: There was a little bit of difference, not a lot. They were reasonably similar. Rum Dum, this one I told you about I flew the hundredth mission. It was an old airplane of course, and it had an idiosyncrasy. When you'd get up at altitude, you use your superchargers because there isn't enough oxygen there, so the superchargers packed the air in so you could get enough oxygen to burn the gas. When you get up there at 35,000 feet, for some reason that they weve never been able to figure out on this airplane, the superchargers would cut out. You'd start lagging back from the formation, and boy you knew if you got separated from that formation, you're in trouble. Then they'd cut back in, so you'd catch up. You'd go for a while and pretty soon they'd drop again and

you'd fall back. (laughter) So that was fun. Of course, the newer the plane, the better it flew. I got a brand new plane on my last several missions and I named it Gypsy Princess. I don't know why now, I can't remember why. It had a nice gal painted on the side, of course and boy, it was nice. On one mission, I can't remember where we were going, but as we crossed the Channel leaving England, I lost an engine. And this ship was so good that I flew the whole rest of the mission on three engines and didn't have any problem. So they were getting better and better all the time.

Mr. Cox: Now was that a B-17 G?

Dr. Smith: G, yeah.

Mr. Cox: G, is that the one with the lower chin turret?

Dr. Smith: Yeah, all the Gs had, they put a few of those on the Fs but all the Gs had the chin turret. Yeah, we had thirteen 50 caliber machine guns and usually at least 900 rounds of 50 caliber per gun.

Mr. Cox: Who manned the chin?

Dr. Smith: The chin was the bombardier. He manned it and the navigator, both up in the nose. There were two side guns up in the nose that the navigator would man. And of course we had the top turret too, which the engineer took care of. He was always right behind the pilots there. When we would take off, lots of times we took off when you couldn't even, the weather was so bad that you couldn't see the end of the runway. So I would watch the side of the runway, to stay on the runway, the copilot would watch the instruments and tell me what was going on and the engineer would stand behind us and read off the air

speed. Because you knew when you either got up to ninety miles an hour or the end of the runway, you took off. (laughter)

Mr. Cox: One or the other! (laughter)

Dr. Smith: Whichever got there first. (laughter) But I started to tell you about the guns. There's two side gunners, a ball turret gunner underneath and a tail gunner so there's thirteen 50 calibers all together.

Mr. Cox: So when you were on a mission, most of it was flak so basically your gunners didn't have anything to do?

Dr. Smith: No, they weren't really busy. As I was about to say, about a third of our missions we had fighter attacks. But they always had to be alert.

Mr. Cox: Certainly, just observing what was going on around you.

Dr. Smith: One day we bombed Frankfurt and I lost an engine over the target but we were coming back and I didn't think I was going to have any problem. We crossed the Zuiderzee, skirted the coast of Holland to avoid anti-aircraft guns and we got a message from England that said everything was closed down, couldn't land in England. This was after the invasion so part of France was free. So they advised us to go down the coast of France and cut in towards Paris and suggested a field about twenty-five miles west of Paris to land. Well, we went down the coast and crossed the French coast and started inland and we lost another engine. So we were on two. Well, the first engine, feathered okay. You know what that is, when you feather the engine. And it was no problem, but the second engine wouldn't feather. It lost the oil pressure so it couldn't feather. And you'd be surprised how much drag it

creates, those flat, darn propeller blades and man, you just had to keep all kinds of rudder in to keep it straight. I thought, well, I may be still be able to make that airfield west of Paris but then the engine that I couldn't feather, started to rotate. As they usually do. It gets faster and faster and faster. And pretty soon, of course, the crankshaft will break and the propeller is about almost even with the pilot. (laughter) There's about a fifteen to twenty percent chance they might break and join you there in the cockpit. So you get real nervous. And boy, it just shakes the hell out of the airplane. It shakes so much, I had my hands on the four throttles, the copilot was on the four propeller controls and the engineer was over our shoulder holding the four mixture controls in place otherwise they wouldn't stay in place. The plane was shaking that bad. I thought, "The wings are going to come off this thing so I'd better do something." I was still going to try to make it to that Paris field but the unfeathered engine caught fire. We had passed a base two or three minutes back. I didn't know what kind of base it was but it had a landing field. Obviously an American base of some type so I turned around real fast and started to come in on the runway. I saw it was a two-engine bomber base, B-26 base. One was just landing, one was on final approach and one had just about turned on final approach. Well, I started to come in on that runway and I thought, "Boy! This is not going to work." So I switched over to another runway and trying to get lined up with the darn thing. I just about lined up, about half way down the runway and I looked ahead and there was a jeep driving right down the middle of the runway. There were three guys in

this jeep and can you believe it? They jumped and ran and left the damn jeep sitting there. Had to pull up, go over that jeep. We went off the end of the runway. Fortunately it was a wide open field out there. Grass or wheat or something, I don't know what it was. There was a big shell hole about twenty feet across. I had my wheels down because I thought I was going to land on a runway. They didn't catch. Just barely brushed the top of that. If they'd caught that good, it would have really smeared us up. But we went across that and went out into the field. The field was pretty soft, wheels sinking in and we went waaay up on the nose, and I thought, "We're going over." But it didn't, it settled back down. So we jumped out and put out the fire. The fire engine came out from the base and put it out. Nobody was hurt, everybody came out alive.

Mr. Cox: And the plane was repaired later on?

Dr. Smith: Oh yeah. They repaired it and brought it back eventually.

Mr. Cox: Well, you've had some experiences. While you were over there, were you married at the time?

Dr. Smith: Yeah. I'd gotten married in March, before I went over in September.

Mr. Cox: Tell me what letters meant to you.

Dr. Smith: Oh God, you'd die for those letters, you know. And the mail was so erratic. You'd get one, wait two weeks and get five. My wife was real good. She was good to write. She wrote very frequently. Boy, they just made a tremendous difference. So I knew what was going on.

Mr. Cox: Unless someone's been there, they don't understand.

Dr. Smith: It was tremendous on the morale.

Mr. Cox: How about USO shows. Did they have any USO shows while you were over there?

Dr. Smith: Ah, they had a lot of shows there. Actually, Glen Miller was there, shortly before he died. Hundredth or two hundredth mission, I can't remember. They brought a tremendous crowd. Yeah, they'd have dances there pretty often. They'd go out and bring in some of the local college girls and groups. (laughter) They'd bring them in for the dance and then a sign would appear up on the wall, "All guests must be out by Wednesday." (laughter) The next time we had a dance, we got some Wrens [WRNS – Women of the Royal Naval Services], you know, English women's military. We went out to get some more again and their officer said, "No way! They didn't get back until the middle of the week last time." (laughter) Yeah, we had the shows. I can't remember any comedians; Bob Hope wasn't there when I was there. We had dances. And of course we had an officer's club. Everybody drank quite a bit. They had a pool table there. When you came down, they'd interview you to find out what happened and if you saw planes go down, how many got out.

Mr. Cox: Debriefed you.

Dr. Smith: And all kinds of details, fighter attacks and so on. And you got a double scotch, if you wanted it.

Mr. Cox: After you debriefed?

Dr. Smith: During debriefing. (laughter)

Mr. Cox: They'd give you more than one?

Dr. Smith: Yeah. Several guys didn't drink it. (laughter)

Mr. Cox: Yeah, that's true.

Dr. Smith: You know about buzz bombs, you know what those are? A thousand pound bomb with a little motor on top, a ramjet engine on top. And they were launching these from Holland and the French coast for a while. And they didn't bother us too much then. Of course, they shot about 6,000 towards London and killed about 6,000 people. But after the invasion, they had to move it up north and then a lot of them, they started releasing from airplanes over the North Sea. That put us in Buzz Bomb Alley. They'd come over our base quite often. When they first came over, of course, it was quite an attraction. We'd get up and watch them because they were four, or five thousand feet up and noise, funny noise, pounding engine and we'd watch them for a few nights and then it got to be old, didn't pay any attention. We went to bed one night and we were going to fly the next day. About ten o'clock, we were just getting to sleep and all of a sudden the base air alarm went off. Well, we'd been hit by German night fighters a couple of times. They blew up a hanger once and burned two planes. So we thought, the German night fighters were probably back. So immediately we went out, there's a slit trench out in front. Just a big hill of dirt and some bricks lining the inside so you get inside that for protection. Well, we all got in that slit trench. I got out there and looked up and here comes a buzz bomb. And it was low and it looked like it was going to go right through the door (laughter) of our barracks. We were living in quonset huts. Right through the door! I

thought, "Oh my God!" And I looked back at the door. My navigator was standing in the door like, just like he was going to block it from coming in. Well, that damn thing went over and that ramjet just pounds, just deafens you. So loud. And the vibration, and you could feel the heat from the engine, smell the exhaust, it was probably fifty foot up. But it was something. And it went on, just barely missed the water tower near the mess hall, went on beyond the front gate about a mile into a field and exploded. No damage. We turned around, went back in the barracks. There wasn't a stitch of clothing left on the hangers. It shook everything; it was all on the floor. And we had to pick it all up before we went to bed. (laughter) And then they had the V-2s. They went so high and so fast, you couldn't hear them. And you'd never know it. They'd hit and take out a block. Then they had the V-3s on the drawing board, did you know that? They were three-stage rockets that would hit Washington and New York but they never got them produced.

Mr. Cox: Hitler had really counted on them.

Dr. Smith: He was working on the atomic bomb, of course and he had these big, flat wing fighters like we have nowadays. He was working on one of those. You know, technically, the Germans were ahead of us. Their tanks were always better than our tanks.

Mr. Cox: Yeah, their technology....

Dr. Smith: Fortunately, we could outnumber them. We could just build more and build faster.

Mr. Cox: Exactly.

Dr. Smith: But their technology was ahead of ours.

Mr. Cox: After you flew your thirty five missions, then you got to go home?

Dr. Smith: Yeah! Got to go home. Sent me down to Miami for rest and recreation. And we were down there for a while and they said, "Well, if you want to, we'll check you out in B-29s now and you can go to the Pacific." So I got one check-out in a B-29 and they called a bunch of pilots in one day and said, "Well, the war in England is winding down. You can go ahead and finish your B-29 training and go to the Pacific if you want or you can get out."

Zoom! [sound effect]

Mr. Cox: They gave you the opportunity to get out.

Dr. Smith: Yeah, I got out.

Mr. Cox: Wow. So how long were you in, actually?

Dr. Smith: Twenty-six months. Twenty months of training, six months of combat. Then I went back to school, and ah, I went to Friends University before I went in and I went to Wichita State University to finish my pre-optometry and then I went to Chicago. The College of Optometry for three years there. Then you could go year-round, no summer vacation so you finished in three years. Then I came back home and practiced optometry for forty-eight years in Wichita. And then I've been retired for sixteen years.

Mr. Cox: So you've had a full life.

Dr. Smith: Pretty full.

Mr. Cox: Now, before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Dr. Smith: Ah, yeah! These reunions are really enjoyable. We have a lot of fun, see friends, of course. We're all getting old and I don't know what's going to happen to the association. It's probably getting near its end. So it's a delight to be able to come here and I've enjoyed talking to you.

Mr. Cox: Well, once again, thank you for what you did for our country and thanks for taking the time for the interview.

Dr. Smith: It was my honor, sir.

(end of CD)

FINAL copy
CD - Lewis A. Smith
Transcribed by: K. Gue
Colorado Springs, CO
February 2013