

Veteran: BELK, Louis
Service Branch: ARMY AIR CORPS
Interviewer: Heath, Amanda
Date of Interview: April 22, 2003
Date of Transcription: December 19, 2004
Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: World War II; B-17 Waist Gunner; In D-Day invasion

Special Note: This tape had a great deal of background noise, and Veteran speaks very softly through the majority of this interview, making transcription very difficult. Following is the best possible interpretation of that interview. Ellipses (...) will be used to indicate passages that could not be understood.

Interviewer: Today is April 22nd. My name is Amanda Heath, and I am interviewing Louis Belk.

Are you aware that this interview will be taped and will be used in the Lee College library?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you drafted?

Veteran: No. I volunteered. I was going to be drafted in probably about two weeks, but the reason I volunteered was I could get into the Air Corps, and if I hadn't volunteered I'd have been in the infantry, and I didn't like the infantry. I volunteered one year to the day after Pearl Harbor.

Interviewer: And, how old were you at that time?

Veteran: I was 18.

Interviewer: Can you describe your feelings upon leaving home, and describe the home situation when your family knew you were leaving.

Veteran: I had already been away from home. I was in the CCC camp, which was the Civilian Conservation Corps—had been there for nine months, and so some friends of mine and me joined the Army right out of camp there. We were in Nevada at the time. I'm sure my family missed me, because I was the oldest and

was the father figure in the family. My father was gone at that time. My three sisters and brothers looked up to me and still do—even now. The girl that interviewed me for my draft card was a classmate of mine in high school, and back at one of the reunions, I asked her about it. She said she didn't remember signing me up, but I remembered her name. Before I was drafted, I worked for the USO Club in Temple, Texas, so I had contact with the Army and the Air Corps, and all those things. We were in the Army Air Corps—that was before we were called it the Air Force.

Interviewer: What types of training did you receive, and where did you receive it?

Veteran: My first training was at Wichita Falls, which was more or less like a boot camp. We stayed there for about eighteen weeks. I was on KP, which was kitchen police, every weekend. I didn't get to go to town in all that time. Me and the corporal that was in charge of the barracks didn't get along real well. He didn't like me, and I didn't like him, so he kept me on KP duty all the time. Then I was transferred to El Dorado for gunnery school and came out as a flexible gunner, which was a waist gunner, and then I went to Amarillo, which was an engine mechanics school for aircraft. I stayed there for awhile and learned how to be a mechanic for airplanes. Then after that we went to several different places. I was stationed at Howard(?), Texas, where we trained for bombing, and then we went to Dalhart, Texas, which was for navigational training. One night while we were at Dalhart, we were flying over Kansas, and we had two engines go out on the airplane, and one of them was on fire...

Interviewer: When did you actually join the war, and where were you first stationed?

Veteran: We took pathfinder training...went up Brooklyn Naval Base in New York, and we got on a plane there...and it took about six days to cross...That was in early January of 19__ that we crossed the ocean. I hadn't been there before...

Interviewer: Can you describe the mood of you and the other soldiers at that point? Were ya'll excited or scared?

Veteran: Oh, we were all real excited, and I think we were too dumb to be scared... We were very young, and didn't realize what kind of dangers we were getting into. In fact, we probably went through the whole war without realizing it.

Interviewer: Were ya'll all pretty young?

Veteran: I think the oldest man was about 28 years old, and the rest of us were quite a bit younger. I'd had my twentieth birthday in Washington(?).

Interviewer: Can you describe the aircraft you were on?

Veteran: I was on a B-17, and it had the type of wings... There was thirteen guns on it. The waist gun... The tail gunner had two guns...and the ball turret had two guns, and he was the oldest man on the crew, I guess, at that time... They tried to send him home, but he wouldn't go. He said he and his wife fought all the time, and he didn't want to do that. So the thing was designed to be a fortress in the air. Actually, it would cause major damage... We came through a lot of balloons... All planes flew back and forth, like a pattern...

Interviewer: Were you or the aircraft ever injured seriously?

Veteran: The aircraft was shot up quite a bit, but there was not a man in my 10-man crew that even got a scratch until about the last mission. We had loaned our...to another crew, and...he had to go to the hospital, but the rest of us...

Interviewer: Did you lose anyone close to you during the war, and if so, how did that affect you?

Veteran: I did have one good friend that was on another crew, and I can't even remember his name now, but I remember that I had brought a piece of parachute silk home that he had made into a scarf, and they had lined us up to go out that night...and they said, "No, the second crew is going to go in your place." My friend was on that plane, and it was shot down... I think I probably have that piece of parachute silk tucked in a box upstairs somewhere. It's amazing that we didn't remember the names of people. I didn't remember the names of a lot of our crew until I started... I went to the group reunion year before last at Tulsa, Oklahoma... and I met one man that I hadn't seen in fifty-something years, so we sat down and had

a big talk with him, and of course I got pictures with him, too. He lives in Okmulgee... He's probably maybe a year older than I am.

Interviewer: Can you describe your living conditions, the food you ate, and where you slept?

Veteran: Our living conditions over in England were very good. We moved into a British air base...and they had running water, and sometimes it was hot. We did have good meals... We could get along real well with that.

Interviewer: Can you describe a typical day when you were over there?

Veteran: Flying?

Interviewer: Just from the time you woke up until nighttime.

Veteran: When they called us out on a mission, we knew about it ahead of time—the night before, and they usually woke us up about two, three, or four o'clock in the morning... Then we had breakfast... When we got up there, we went into a briefing... Navigators were being... They told us the time we were going to take off, where we were going, and what we were going to do at that time. The kind of targets we were supposed to hit. They'd usually give us the time they expected us to go over there and come back... We were usually very fortunate... Then we would go to lunch, which was fair. Sometimes it was something like Spam... It would sustain us. I was a country boy, and I was getting food I hadn't had before. I weighed about 100 or 110 pounds when I went in the service, and I got up to around 160 pounds. After I got out, I got back down, and when we married fifty years ago, I weighed 126 pounds. But that was a typical day, and then we'd go back to the barracks after we'd eat to take a shower or whatever else we had to do. Then if we had to leave at night, we'd go out to a local club or if we had a couple of days off, we'd catch a plane and go to London and spend some time there and then come back. We could always look at the girls and drink whatever we could find, those kind of things that wild boys would do.

Interviewer: What types of equipment were you trained with?

Veteran: I was trained with a 50-caliber machine gun, and that was my primary equipment. That was the primary equipment I was trained on. I could do minor repair work on engines on airplanes...and could put it back together...

Interviewer: I don't know if this affected ya'll any, but did you ever experience any chemical warfare at all?

Veteran: No. We had gas masks...I kept my gas mask in case...I carried it with me.

Interviewer: How were you treated by the civilians you encountered?

Veteran: Most of them were very good. The British people treated us fine, but some of the British soldiers didn't like us too well, because we had more money than they had, and of course the girls like us better than they did because of that. We always had chocolates and cigarettes to hand out, so we were treated very nice. In fact, some of the boys did marry some of those English girls. I never even gave that a thought...

Interviewer: The 8th Air Force of the Army Air Corps is somewhat famous. We studied about them in school. Can you tell me a little bit about what made it more significant than the others, or why it's still talked about it today?

Veteran: The 8th Air Force was the group that always got something done. They went in and did their job. It didn't make any difference what the obstacles were. Of course, the men that were in charge of the 8th Air Force, like General Doolittle, they were famous before they got with the 8th Air Force... These men were airmen, and they were trained during the First World War, so that's one thing that made the 8th Air Force famous. The 8th Air Force included B-17s, B-24s... , and each one of them had a can-do spirit. We decided that if anybody could do it, we could, so that was the mindset that made us famous.

Interviewer: You said that you flew 27 missions. Was there a cut-off point at the time?

Veteran: At the time we went over there, they were supposed to fly 25 missions and then get to come home. After we started flying, they set it at 35 missions, and so we flew two more missions—27—and in the meantime, our first pilot was promoted to company commander... I think he had a hand in sending us home... So they

sent us home in order to get us... and they gave us 30-days leave to do that. The B-17 was supposed to be obsolete at that time, because the B-29 had come along, and we thought that we'd be going to the South Pacific... and so we finished out the war in the South Pacific.

Interviewer: What moment left the biggest impression on your mind? Could you narrow it down to a single thing?

Veteran: No, not really. I've put it this way several times, and I think it's the way most of us felt: I wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience, but I wouldn't give two cents for any more of it, so I guess that's the impression it made. I certainly did enjoy the time I spent in the Air Force. When I came out of the service, I decided that I was going home to fly. I had had a-hold of the airplane a time or two momentarily, so I went out to take a course to learn how to fly an airplane on the G.I. Bill. I passed all my paperwork, and the second time I went out, the instructor showed up, and he'd been drinking, so I walked home, and I've never been back in an airplane except some little show plane. I haven't flown since that time.

Interviewer: Was there ever a time that you thought you may have lost hope and thought you might not return home?

Veteran: No, that never really entered my mind. I knew it could happen. We were flying along the side of one plane, and I was looking at it and watching it, and our commanding officer was in that plane, and I knew that, because we flew Number One and Number Two in the group every time. We were lead plane and Number Two plane. We turned left, and I looked away and looked back, and there was just a cloud of smoke there. There was nothing else. Not a man came out of it or nothing—it just completely disintegrated. That was in my mind, but it didn't bother me, because I just brushed it off with, "Well, it was their time."

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF SIDE A. SIDE B BEGINS}

Interviewer: Under what circumstances were you finally relieved of all duty?

Veteran: I came out on the point system in 1945. The point system was to get the men out that had more points... overseas duty, and such as that. I had 81 points, and I was

in Amarillo teaching classes there in engine operations... They sent me on a train back to Randolph Field in San Antonio, and released me from there. When I got to San Antonio, there was a female officer that was taking all the information, and when she got down to the end of it, and said, "I'm sorry, but you don't have enough points." I said, "Why don't I have enough points?" She said, "You didn't do this, and this, and this." I said, "Wait just a minute. I've got the American Defense medal, which you haven't counted..." She said, "You really got it." I said, "Sure enough. Just look in the records." When I came back from overseas, they'd lost all of my records, and I was on partial pay... because there was no records at home, so that was quite a hassle. I was terminated at the end of about 33 months. That was the time that Germany had already surrendered, and so had Japan. September of 1945.

Interviewer: What were your feelings about the war, now that you had been there and it was over with?

Veteran: I think it was necessary. I had heard something awhile back when an American was talking to people over there, and those people spoke about three or four languages. This man sat there for a few minutes and said, "Well, if it hadn't been for us, you'd a been speaking German." So, I think it was necessary. I think we'd have been a fool to let those people rule the world. We had to stop it.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the different awards or medals that you received and what you received them for?

Veteran: The main one was the Distinguished Flying Cross, and that was for fulfilling my 25 missions. Before that we got the Air Medal, and that was for each 5 missions, and I got three Oak Leaf Clusters. Also, I got the Theatre of Operations medal, which was for the European Theatre, and I got three battle stars for it. And then, of course, I got the Good Conduct medal. It took me about a year and a half to get that, and most people got it in six months, but I didn't. I had too many problems with this barracks officers. Anyway, I had the American Defense medal, and also these commemorative medals.

Interviewer: Can you describe your arrival back home and how you were treated, both privately and publicly?

Veteran: Coming from over there, we left from Wales in a C-54 airplane. We came and landed in Westin, Maine, and we boarded another plane and landed in LaGuardia Field in New York. Then we left there on a train and went to Washington, D.C. Several of us decided we were not going to catch that train. We spent the night in the hotel, and missed that train. The one thing that I do remember was somebody was griping about the government owing us something, and I told them right quick, "The government doesn't owe me anything. They paid me my paycheck every time." The main thing I was interested in was getting some dress clothes..." After we left Westin, we came to New Orleans, and we missed the train again—intentionally—in New Orleans, and so me and about three or four others spent the night down there, and caught the train the next morning, and went up to Alexandria, which is Camp Polk, or Fort Polk. They were going to ship us out of there to different places. We were going home for 30-days leave. I had lost all my papers, so they gave me some new clothes and part-time or partial pay. I got on a train in Alexandria and went to Marshall, Texas, and during the night I decided I'd call my parents and tell them I'm in the United States, and that's the first time they knew it. So, I called my parents at home in New Braunfels and told them I was in the United States and in Marshall, and I was on the way home. We came into San Antonio and back out of San Antonio thirty miles up to New Braunfels. Of course, they met me at the train station—my sisters and my mother—and we didn't have a car, so we walked home... They were all excited because I was coming home, and of course I was all excited, too, so I stayed 30 days there, and spent that time trying to get acquainted with my family again. At that age, my sisters had some boyfriends, and I got introduced to everyone of them. I had two sisters just younger than me, and then a baby sister was six years younger. They were going to school and had made a lot of friends. Then, we got back on a plane after our 30 days was up, and headed out to Atlantic City, New Jersey. When we started out there, a tidal wave had torn up the boardwalk... When we went into Atlantic City... I didn't know if the bridges had washed out or not. We got off there, and they put us up in hotels, and we stayed there three weeks... From there, they shipped us to Miami Beach, Florida,

where they also put us up in hotels. We had a ball down there, and stayed for three weeks. Then they sent us out for what they called Rest and Recuperation—R&R—and so I went to Lake Lure, North Carolina, which was a big chalet-type house, where you could go fishing, and stuff like that, and I stayed there I think about three or four weeks up there... We'd sit around and talk and drink. We went out and gathered apples and made cider. We had a lot of fun. The main thing that happened in Lake Lure was, with me being the only Texan down there, I had on boots, and I had a red silk cowboy shirt. The sergeant didn't like that too much, so he turned me in to the major, who was my commanding officer. I had to report to him, and walk into his office there and told him who I was, and he said, "Where are you from, Tex?" I said, "San Antonio. Where are you from?" He said, "Cow-town. Sit down—let's talk." So he was from Fort Worth, and I was from San Antonio, so we sat there and talked. Got through talking about what we'd done and that kind of thing, and I asked him, "What are we going to do about that master sergeant?" He said, "Don't worry about. I'll take care of it." After that, I had no more trouble with the master sergeant at all. The major had talked him about his Texas friend. Then when we got through there, we went back to Miami Beach and stayed there about two or three weeks until we were shipped out, and I went from there on a train to _____. We made an engine hop there, and I stayed the rest of the war there until I was discharged...

Interviewer: That's about it unless you can think of anything else you'd like to tell me.

Veteran: I get to talking and reminiscing, and if you get a couple of old veterans they'll go to reminiscing about the things that happened to them, but we had a lot of fun. Sadly, we got into a lot of trouble, and we got out of trouble. I was in downtown Amarillo one time, and of course I drank too much. I was almost an alcoholic. I had lost my tie and lost my cap, and my fold wasn't very straight. Went in this hotel, and one guy went to a one star general, and he began to dress me down, and I didn't say a word except, "Yes, Sir; Yes, Sir." I had a cousin that lived in Amarillo, so I went back to her house, and I got on the sewing machine with some material and made me a hat and a tie that I put on in order to get ____ back in camp. While I was there, one of the stories on my web page has to do with one of my special friends... We were AWOL, and later on, I wrote a letter... I had

met her... Started back to Amarillo, and the car broke down, and we tried to turn ourselves into the MP, and they wouldn't take us. They asked, "How'd you get here?" We told him we'd hitchhiked, and he said, "Well, get back the same way you come. We don't want you." We went down to the barracks and cleaned up, and took a bath, and we went to see the major about the AWOL. I walked in there, and he said, "Sgt. Belk, you are AWOL for three days." I said, "No, Sir." He said, "What do you mean 'No, Sir'?" I said, "I've been gone five days, Sir." He said, "Five days?" I told him the whole story, and then when Doug came in, he confirmed the story, and then the major said, "Well, I've got to punish you, so I'll put you on extra duty or something. Go back there in the warehouse in the supply room and tell that sergeant to put you on extra duty." Went back there, and the sergeant wanted to know what we was doing there, so I told him, and he said, "Well, I don't want you. Sign your name down there, and do whatever you want to." So, Doug and I went to town and spent three days in town. So, it was a ball all the way around. We were just having a ball the whole time we were in there. I did get to go to several different schools, and I was glad of that... Was living in a boarding house at the time, and was separated from the family... My mother saved all this stuff in this box. She was 72 years old when she died in 1977, and she saved... My oldest son got interested in it, and then I decided I'd go ahead and do this website so they'd... Of course, Matthew's in high school now, so he's telling everybody, "When Pawpaw's gone, that's all mine." I've got two grandchildren—a boy and a girl. The boy's 15 and the girl's 20... He's not bashful about telling folks his Pawpaw fought in the war, and he's a hero, but I don't feel much like a hero... I made D-Day, which was the invasion at Normandy Beach. We got to talking about the D-Day Museum at that reunion in Tulsa, and my son said we need to go to that. We talked about it last year, and then this year we said we were going, so my oldest son and my grandson came, and we went to New Orleans. They took care of everything, and the next morning we got up at the hotel and went to the D-Day Museum. When I got in there, the receptionist asked me if I was a veteran, and I said, "Yeah, I'm a veteran." So, they took all my information and my son bought me a brick to put in the walkway down there with my name, and he paid everything on that, too.

So we spent a couple of days down there and back. ... They're all interested in it. My children really support us...

{END OF INTERVIEW}