

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Frank E. Stout Jr.

Conducted by John Gay

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This is John Gay interviewing Frank Stout at his home in Downers Grove on November 12, 2011.

[Transcriber's note: Mrs. Stout is present as well. Her contributions are italicized in brackets. Occasionally there is an additional voice, a granddaughter, Jamie, who was also present, and that person's comments are in brackets but not italicized.]

Entering Military Service

Frank, what we're interested in is what you were doing before you went into the service, where you went in, when, and that sort of thing.

Before I went into the service I had just graduated from high school. From high school I went into the service. I was in the infantry first.

When did you go in?

What year did I go in – '42? Do you know? [Frank defers to another person present: *"I know in 1942 I have pictures of you playing baseball, so you must have gone after this."*]

It might have been 1943. Here's my plane: *"This is the 'Never Mrs.' and it was actually – tell them the story about your plane."*

That was somebody else's plane. That was the plane I got shot down in. But it wasn't our plane.

So you went in in 1943?

Yes. I graduated from high school in February, 1943 and right after I went into the army.

Was that in the Chicago area?

Yes. I went to Calumet High School in Chicago.

Where did you live at that time, because that's near where I went to high school.

85th & Bishop. I grew up there.

I lived at 80th & Wolcott.

That's where my girlfriend lived – 86th & Wolcott. Did you know the O'Gorman's?

I knew an O'Gorman in the parish – Little Flower or St. Ethelreda?

St. Ethelreda.

She was out of my territory. She was probably too good looking for me anyway!

No, I don't think so. My wife has got her ears going. She's going to say, "Who the hell is she?" [*Was that before Dot?*] Yes. [*Started young.*] Oh, yeah.

So you got out of high school in 1943.

Yes, in February.

Were you drafted or did you join up?

I joined.

Where at?

I went to downtown Chicago.

615 W. Van Buren?

That's it. I couldn't remember. I went down to join – a couple of buddies and I. And they refused to take us. And it wasn't two weeks later and we got drafted!

Basic and Further Training

They changed their mind.

It was stupid. We got drafted into the infantry. I was in Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri. That's where I did my basic training.

Eight weeks down there?

Yes. The 75th Division of the 289th Infantry, Company I – the weapons platoon. I was the second gunner, a machine gunner.

I hated the infantry – all this living out in the woods and hiking crap. So my buddy and I decided we were going to join the Air Corps. But you had to pass the cadet exam. We both passed the exam and we both ended up – I'm not too sure but I think it was Colorado. [*Wasn't that Denver?*] Denver. Yes.

Anyway, we joined the cadets. But there were so damn many cadets they took my buddy and I down to see some colonel. He looked at our records and said to me, "You'd be a good mechanic. We've got too many cadets." I said, "Okay." So they sent me to armament school.

They say "All mechanics fall out." So I fell out and ended up in armament school. I said, "Shit, I don't want this – loading bombs." So I signed up for gunnery school. I was in Tyndall Field, Florida with the gunnery school there. Then, from there I went to Westover Field, Massachusetts. And we got assigned to a crew.

Now, you were in training all this while?

Oh, yeah. I had basic training and infantry. [*“How long were you in infantry?”*] I think I went through all basic in Ft Leonard Wood.

Yes. Fort Leonard-Wood was probably that, and then more training at different schools?

Well, I got out of Ft Leonard Wood. I took the Air Corps cadet test. There's only two ways to get out of the infantry – join the paratroopers or pass the cadet exam. I said, “I ain't joining no paratroopers,” so my buddy and I passed the cadet exam. [*“Now you're in Florida again.”*] Yes. And from there ... [*“You went to Massachusetts?”*] Yes. After we finished gunnery school in Florida we went to Westover Field, Massachusetts to be assigned to a crew on a plane. That's how we met our pilot, co-pilot and navigator and all that stuff. There were ten guys on a crew: tail gunner, nose gunner, top turret gunner and me in the waist. I was the ball turret until they took that thing out, Thank God.

What plane was it – a B17?

It was a B24. There's a picture of it.

Frank is showing the picture here of the B24 ‘Never Mrs.’

[*“That was the Liberator. Is that right?”*] Yes. You know what they call that plane? Do you mind if I swear? Four engine whore.

So anyways I went to Tyndall Field gunnery school. I finished gunnery school – I signed up for it, by the way. From there went to Westover Field, Massachusetts where I was assigned to a crew of a B24. And we did a few training missions over the Atlantic Ocean. We'd throw a smudge bomb in the ocean, then fly over and shoot at it. Big deal.

That was off the coast of Massachusetts?

No. That was in Tyndall Field, Florida. When I got to Westover Field, Massachusetts, we also flew over the ocean on crew training. I ended up in a crew – that's where you got assigned to a crew, pilot, co-pilot, navigator, and all that.. [*“Was that your crew that you went down with?”*] Yes. [*“So that would be all these guys?”*] That would be all those guys. Yes.

Frank is showing us a picture now of the crew that was on the ‘Never Mrs.’ that was shot down.

That was our crew.

How long were you in Florida?

I don't know. Probably six weeks. I don't know.

Deployment Overseas

And then you got shipped out?

No. I got shipped to Massachusetts to Westover Field. Tyndall Field was the gunnery school, and after that they shipped us to Westover Field, Massachusetts. And that's where we joined up with a crew, pilot, co-pilot, gunnery. Then we flew practice missions over the Atlantic Ocean. Then we went overseas.

We flew to England. We lost one plane going to England.

Was that a big convoy of planes that went over at one time?

Yes.

You landed in England at one of the bases?

Yes. I can't remember the name of it. Oh, it was Old Buckenham, England. Then we flew from England to bomb Germany.

This is still 1943, or are you in 1944?

We're in 1944. [*"Was this Old Buckenham, England?"*] Yes.

Buckingham, England?

[*"Old Buck. Old Buckenham, England"*] No. The airfield. (Note: Old Buckenham was the name of an airfield in England where Jimmy Stewart served during WWII) [*"And they were in those kind of barracks). That's where you stayed, right?"*] That's where I drank beer and ate fish.

Fish and chips?

Yes. Fish and chips. You got that right. It was good, too!

How many missions did you go on, then?

The fourth one we got shot down.

You know, all this stuff back home? You go over Germany and there's B24's and B17's scattered all over Germany. They were shot down. They were so easy to shoot down flying in formation. All you had to do was shoot up there and you're going to hit something.

We got shot down. We got hit in the #3 engine and it was on fire. I was in the waist. The tail gunner was the first who saw it. He came out of the tail and right after that the thing got blown off! That was Tom Notcher. Good thing he got out of there! Then, we went into a spin. Tom and I are trying to open the trap door and put on our chutes. We never wore the chutes – we just threw them in there as baggage. So we put them on and we lay on the floor trying to open the hatch. We couldn't open the hatch. So we went into a spin and were pinned by centrifugal force on the floor. He could hardly raise his arm. Right after that the pilot pulled us out. We got up ... [*“He pulled you out of the spin?”*]

The plane was in a flat spin. And the centrifugal force pinned us down. When he pulled it out we were able to get up. So what Tom and I did, we both bailed out. [*“I thought the plane split in half. I thought you had told me once that the plane had split in half. When did it do that? When did the plane split in half?”*] Right after Tom Notcher. Then we got hit again. I don't know how many times. We went into a spin and then it broke in half. I don't know how we got out because with the centrifugal force we couldn't get up.

Did all the men get out of the plane?

No. Just the ... [*“What happened to the radio guy?”*] No. The navigator, the co-pilot, the tail-gunner and myself were the only ones who got out. [*“Out of ten.”*]

Four out of ten. Where were you over – what part of Germany were you over?

I think it was Gelsenkirchen. I'm not sure. [*“That's what you wrote. That's what you told me.”*]

And what is that near?

[*“It's in south Germany if I'm not mistaken.”*] It was either an oil refinery or a power plant. That was our mission – blow up their power plant and get rid of their oil. Because when we were flying a mission the German planes could only make one pass because they didn't have any fuel. They'd make one pass at us and then they would go home. If they didn't knock us down, it was too bad.

I remember seeing a Focke-Wolfe 190 and an ME 109 come at us shooting. They made one pass over our formation and then they went home. Because that's all the fuel they had.

So that's one of the reasons you were bombing all the oil fields – to keep them from getting fuel. Was that Ploesti? Were you after the Ploesti oil fields?

Yes. That was the one. But we used to go to interrogation before the mission. You know, I was 18 years old. I never listened to what he was saying. It was like in school – the guy's up at the board telling us. I thought: That was enough. We go on a mission and we'll see where we're at. Well, you know – you're too young to be smart.

Take it into advisement. How high were you when you bailed out?

I have no idea, because we went into a spin. We were about 25,000 feet when we got hit, then went into a flat spin. I don't know high we were. We must have been up there pretty far.

How long did it take you to come down?

I have no idea. It seemed like forever! It wasn't. I know that. But it seemed like forever.

What happened when you hit the ground?

I hit a roof. I landed on a roof. In Germany they had these tile roofs, and I busted right through the roof.

That's one way to get into the living room, anyway!

Yeah. Anyway, I guess my legs went through. I spilled the chute – got rid of that and pulled myself up and sat on the ridge. And here comes – I felt like I was in the movies – here comes German soldiers pointing rifles at me and yelling, "Pistola, pistola." I said, "Yeah, yeah." I had a 45 pistol – Edward G. Robinson style. And I threw it down to them. [*"Then what did they want?"*] Like my brother-in-law said: Why didn't you take it out and shoot them? He was just a kid – he watched John Wayne. These guys were pointing rifles at me, and I had this 45. I couldn't hit anything with it anyway – they weren't very accurate. But if you did hit somebody you'd knock them down. [*"They wanted you to come down, didn't they?"*] Oh, yeah.

How did they get you down? Did they have a ladder?

No. They came up and pulled me down through the roof, and I walked down the stairs.

What happened to you after that?

Then a couple of German GI's are going home on a furlough, and took me on a train to a concentration camp.

Which one was that? Do you know?

I don't remember.

How long were you in a concentration camp?

About six months.

Was that until the end of their war?

Yes.

May of 1945?

Yes. I think I got shot down on November 11. You know how I knew it was November 11 – when I got interrogated the German officer said it was Armistice Day. He said, “For me it was Armistice Day, too.” And I couldn’t get over how good he spoke English. He mentioned that to me. He said, “Well, I was educated in England.” And he spoke the King’s English.

[“*I remember you telling me that soldiers on the train were good to you.*”] Yes. The German GI’s were just like the American GI’s. [“*They shared a sweater or something with you?*”] Well, they were glad. They were going home on furloughs. If they were going off to fight they would have been mean, probably. But they were going home and were happy – probably a little drunk, maybe. I don’t know.

[“*Didn’t they freeze your feet and walk away? No?*”] [“*Now, your feet got frozen, but that was later – down the road, wasn’t it? Because you got moved from one place to another.*”] It was cold. And we were in the upper part of Germany – in fact, near Poland. And they marched us to another camp. And I couldn’t feel my feet. All I remember is there was this guy – he was older than most of us – he said: “Don’t take off your shoes. You’ll never get them on again.” I can still hear him saying that. And I didn’t. As soon as we got to the camp I took them off. My feet blew up like balloons and I had open sores on them.

Did they give you any medical attention while you were there?

Oh, yeah – what they had. I had open sores on my heels and they put that powder – I don’t know the name – on there. It was good.

Did you have any duties while you were in the concentration camp – POW camp?

No. Well, we had a barracks we stayed in. Just like in the Army. It was probably a German barracks. Anyway, we made one guy in charge of the food because they gave us a bucket of food. And we had one guy in charge who doled it out so we all got a share. You had to do that.

Did the other three guys who bailed out with you, did they wind up in the same camp?

No. No. One of them, Tom Notcher, when he bailed out his leg was hooked on the plane. When he pulled his chute he broke his leg. That was good for him. The Germans put him in a hospital, so he was in the hospital. They took good care of him, too. [“*Freehaver, wasn’t he the co-pilot?*”] Freehaver was the pilot. The co-pilot was Vanderhoeff.

And they went down with you?

Yes. Freehaver got killed – he was the pilot. Vanderhoeff was the co-pilot and he got out. Max Field was the navigator and he got out. Tom Notcher, tail gunner. And that's all that got out. Five went down with the plane.

[*"I remember you telling me that Freehaver, the pilot got killed on the ground."*]
That's right. Civilians killed him. That's the only reason we had the 45 – if the German soldiers were there, give it to them; if it's civilians that come, you're fighting for your life. So it was for protection.

So you were in the concentration camp until VE Day in May.

And the Russians came in. We saw the Russians come in. And the Russians ...
[*"You took this out when you were liberated. Didn't you go in the office?"*] Yes. That was a German ...

Oh, yeah. This is neat.

Who's that good-looking guy!

You don't look too dangerous right there.

No. I wasn't feeling very good.

This is the picture that was taken when you were first apprehended. Were you related to Hal Stout? There was a Hal Stout who went to Ignatius at the same time I did. He was out near St. Ethelreda, I thought.

No. I lived near St. Ethelreda. There was a Stout, but he wasn't related.

So what happened after VE Day? You were liberated and then ...

Well, we knew something was happening. And then one morning we got up, looked and saw no guards in the tower. We figured something was happening. Then the Russians came in. They looked like a bunch of bandits. They came in on horseback, pulling their canons with horses. They looked like something out of ancient history, really. They had fur jackets with the ammunition belts slung over their shoulders, just like Poncho Villa.

But they spoke the wrong language!

We had one of the officers – I don't know where he got the paint, but he got some paint and we had to paint USA on our jackets or the Russians would shoot us! They didn't know who we were. So I had USA painted on my jacket. It was colder than all get out – we were near the Baltic Sea.

Were the barracks heated?

We had a little stove we could make coffee on.

How many men to a barracks?

Oh, I'm taking a guess: Maybe 20.

So it wasn't that big a building, then.

No. It wasn't big. We had double-bunks and the mattress was straw.

How many prisoners were there in that camp, do you think?

Oh, I'd say 1,000. There were a lot.

A lot of casualties because of the winter?

Oh, yeah. That's where I froze my feet. I didn't have any winter gear. That was not very smart. I had civilian shoes, which I put my flying boots on over my shoes. When I got captured they took all the flying equipment off. So I was walking around with civilian shoes. God, it was cold. It was cold. But when you're young ...

Was there any rank among the prisoners? Did you have your regular echelon of officers?

Well, we did in the barracks. We made one guy in charge. He could be a PFC, staff sergeant – I was a staff sergeant – but we voted on it. We had one guy in charge. He was the guy who got the food for us. We were fed like cattle – you came back with a galvanized bucket with food. It was like slop. But when you're hungry you'll eat anything. I was 170 pounds, and when I got liberated I was 130.

Wow. You didn't get your share of the slop, then, did you? Did you lose anybody out of your barracks?

I don't know. Did anybody get killed, did you mean?

No. From the living conditions?

I don't think so. Most everybody was 19-20 years old. We weren't very old. Of course, we thought we were old.

[*"Who were you taking care of around the barracks? Wasn't there somebody you tended to?"*] Oh, yeah. He was an older guy. He couldn't do anything. We'd have to help him down to the bathroom. [*"Was he wounded?"*] No. I don't know – I think he had arthritis. He just couldn't move. So we got one guy under each arm – two guys – if

he had to go to the bathroom. From eating their food. You had to go. You'd go right now. There was always a run to the bathroom.

When the Russians came, did things change much for you?

Yeah. The food changed. The Russians came in. It was kind of funny. They brought a truckload of potatoes in a dump truck and they dumped it – just like you dump coal – on the ground. That was our food.

So it got worse!

So we got a pretty good system. We had a couple of guys on KP to peel the potatoes and do that stuff. We had to paint USA on our jackets or the damn Russians would shoot anybody they didn't recognize.

[*“When did you end up in France in the hospital?”*] When I got liberated. [*“That was after the potatoes?”*] Oh, yeah. We all had malnutrition pretty bad. Because you can't just live on starches. We didn't have anything to drink, really. We had coffee. It was artificial coffee. They called it ersatz. We had a kettle we'd put the water in, and we'd put the coffee in with a handkerchief. We'd tie it and take a spoon and squeeze the juice out of it.

It wasn't Starbucks, I guess.

No! I don't like Starbucks. She likes Starbucks.

How long were you among the Russians before you finally got back to the Americans?

Not too long. I don't know what happened. Anyway, the Americans came in. Time stood still, really. Anyway, the Americans came in and they radioed for planes to take us out. We had C47 cargo planes come in and flew us to an American base.

Was it in Germany or back in England?

In Germany.

How long were you at that air base? You were in the hospital then?

Yes. It was like a hospital – a makeshift hospital.

Was that just to fatten you up again?

No. It was to take care of the running sores on my feet. It wasn't too good. It was probably from malnutrition. When you had to go to the bathroom there were two guys – one on each arm. I put my arm around them. We had an outhouse, and they had to run me to the outhouse. These guys were great. (Frank got a bit choked up at this point.)

So you were there in the hospital for a while.

Yes. I went to France. I was in Paris in a hospital – in a school they converted into a hospital; the Americans did. It was pretty good. We even got cigarettes. Everybody smoked at that time. We used to flip the butts outside the window. And some old lady – probably about my age, 85 or whatever. She'd pick up the cigarettes with a tweezer and clip part of them off and put them in a little purse. I don't know what she did with them. She'd bring them home to her husband, I guess.

I had a friend up on the Island, Frank, who was in the Air Force. And he got shot down over Yugoslavia. He came down from 20,000 feet. He knew he was in enemy territory and he didn't want to look intimidated. So he figured he'd come down smoking a cigarette. And he said, "You don't know how hard it is to light a cigarette coming down in a parachute."

Yeah. Boy, you hear funny stories. This one guy was telling me he was reading letters from his wife when he was coming down. I told him he was full of shit. He said it really happened.

Well, he wanted to look cool like Cary Grant. He thought that would be kind of cool. But he never got it lit. So you were in, then, for just another few months. And then you got out?

Yes. I was in six months: I was shot down November 11 and got liberated the first part of May. [*"When were you discharged?"*] I was discharged. [*"October 31 or something?"*]

October of 1945?

Yes.

Returning to the States and Discharge

Where did you come back to, then – Fort Dix?

No. [*"Didn't you go to San Antonio at one point?"*] Well, I went to gunnery school down there. [*"No. This is after the war."*] Yes, I think I did. They had a mustering out where they would go through all your records, update them and say good-bye. That was in San Antonio, Texas. They gave me money, so I had money to get home. But they say good-bye.

Is that Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio?

No. It was an Air Force base.

I was at Fort Sam Houston down there when I was in.

I can't remember the name.

Returning to Civilian Life

So you came back home to Chicago and they made you go to work.

Yes.

You were what – only 20 years old then?

Yes. I had only finished high school.

So what did you do after that, then?

Well, I was working in a steel shop and going to school. I went to Chicago Tech and took up structural engineering and I was a welder in a steel shop. So I worked until 12:00 and go to downtown Chicago. Chicago Tech was on Michigan Avenue near the new Michigan Hotel.

Did that become Illinois Institute of Technology then?

No.

So you got married then and began raising a family?

Yes.

You were on the GI Bill, were you?

Yes. I went to school and worked in a steel shop half a day as a welder. Then I went to school at Chicago Tech, at 20th and Michigan – we had classes at the new Michigan Hotel. That was at 20th, but the school was at 18th. I was married then, too. I was busy! I'd go to work until noon, I'd go to school until 6:00, then I'd go home and beat-up my wife. [*“Ha-Ha!”*]

And do your homework.

Yes. She beat me up! [*“I'll bet she did!”*]

Lasting Impressions

Was there anything you drew out of the military that you felt changed your life or your outlook on life?

I don't know. It was a good experience, I guess. You've got to say it was a good experience.

Did you ever keep in touch with any of the guys you were in the service with?

I used to keep in touch with the tail-gunner, Tom Notcher, but he passed away not too long ago.

Where did he live?

In Syracuse, New York. [*"We went out there several times."*]

Well, Frank, thanks for taking the time with us. I think it will be interesting to put on the disk for the Library of Congress. We'll get you a copy of it. I appreciate it.

I didn't tell you about all the Germans I shot.

Really?

No. My brother-in-law used to kid me: "Why didn't you take out your 45 and shoot them!"

[*"You didn't tell them about the train trip that you were on. That was always one of my favorite stories."*] [*"Mine, too."*] [*"When you were being transported from one camp to another and you were on the train in the boxcar."*] Oh, the train. That was not too great.

What was that like?

That was like hell. We had a honey-dew bucket with straw in it. If you had to do a big job, that was it. You'd do it in the bucket. [*"You all sat around in the boxcar."*] We all sat around the boxcar, leaning against the wall. [*"And whoever went last had to hold the bucket until the next person had to go."*] Right.

[*"And what about when you had to urinate?"*] We'd go out the sliding door. There was a crack and we'd pee against the door. [*"What would happen if there was a guard?"*] That's what I'm going to tell them. All these boxcars had steel straps and there was a wood step there. The door was a sliding door. And if you pee'd out the door and hit the step while the guard was walking by, he'd get showered. So they put a notice around that if anybody pee'd on a guard they would shoot into the boxcar. So we kicked the door and tell the guard we were pissing and he'd get out of the way. We'd say, "Post man—pissing, Post man—pissing."

That's like raising your hand in grammar school.

I could see him walking up and down and then somebody “showers” him. [*“And that would be funny, too.”*]

Well thanks, Frank, for your time. We’ll stop it here and get it back to you.