

- MILLER: And then I was assigned to a school of A-20s which were twin-engine attack bombers, very much fighter aircraft in a sense, but they were very much a pilot's aircraft. And you went in . . . these were used to back up advancing troops. You'd go in and you'd skip your bombs into objectives, you know, like tanks or gun emplacements or things of that nature. They were very fast. They had . . . almost all of the armor was pointed to the rear on these because nothing much could get in front of them. So anything that was after them was going to be chasing them, you know. (laughs)
- JH: Was this a single . . .
- MILLER: This was a three-man . . .
- JH: Three-man?
- MILLER: Three men, yeah. There was . . . and you were all separate. There was sort of a bombardier-navigator-gunner for the front. There was the one pilot and then there was a gunner to the rear.
- JH: Were the gunners capable of flying the craft in case of emergency?
- MILLER: No. Besides they couldn't even get to where you were.
- JH: I see. So, you were it.
- MILLER: It was that small a craft.
Then we trained in those for a period of time.
- JH: And where was that? Where did you train in those?
- MILLER: This was in Nebraska. And then they arbitrarily pulled everybody out of those and out of fighter aircraft and everything and put us on in B-24s, which were four-engine things. And those aircraft you were supposed to be over 5'11" and over 180 pounds. Well, here I am at 5'8" and I weighed all of 145, probably. (laughs) And that airplane used to lift me right out of the seat on takeoff. There were no hydraulics that took over. You really had to manhandle them. And, of course, they were

MILLER: huge bombers and they were meant to do everything but fly. They were just (commences to laugh) . . . they weren't . . . they were designed to carry a heavy load very high and very long distances. But they were just absolutely . . . if anything failed, they were a rock. They just fell out of the sky.

JH: Did they take you on, you think, because of the need for pilots and you were well-trained and

MILLER: Um hm. It was coming to that point in the war where the Luftwaffe had been fairly well eliminated. And they [the Allies] were really bombing the heavy industry of Germany, and they really needed more of that type of pilot.

JH: Now, where did you train the B-24s?

MILLER: Well, that was also in Nebraska. This was in Lincoln, Nebraska.

And then we moved out to Idaho -- Mountain Home, Idaho. And our crew was made up there and we began most serious training for going overseas.

JH: How many in the crew of the B-24?

MILLER: Well, it varied. But basically, there were two pilots; there was a navigator and a bombardier; there was the upper gunner; there was the belly gunner -- that's six. There were two waist gunners, eight; and the tail gunner, nine. Now, sometimes you carried a photographer, depends upon where you were in the formation. And you would find as many as eleven people on board at times depending on their specialty.

JH: Were they in ready contact with one another?

MILLER: Yes, we were all connected by radio and most of us could get to one another on a ship that size. There was a catwalk down through the bomb bays that you could go down through.

JH: When did you . . . where did you go then from there? How long were you at Mountain Home?

MILLER: Well, that was about a six-month training period.

We were on our way overseas by the summer. If we graduated in May, we spent the summer in transition and we were on our way overseas by early August.

JH: And this is 1945?

MILLER: 'Forty-four.

JH: 'Forty-four, we're still in nineteen forty-four.

MILLER: Still in '44.

JH: All right.

MILLER: We were assigned to the 15th Air Force. We were taken by boat. We landed 'way down on the heel. I joined the 449th Bombardment Squadron.

JH: In Italy?

MILLER: In Italy, yeah. Of the 15th Air Force.

Now, let's see. What transpired during this period of time? We had not taken Rome at this point, because I flew a ship into Rome, oh, about four days after it was liberated and spent four or five days there when it was still being flushed out of the German troops that were leaving. We took medical supplies up in a bomber. We would . . . all of Egypt had been cleared out at this point. That battle was all done and the troops were We helped support the invasion of southern France on the coast around toward Italy. We would fly to Cairo to pick up whiskey for the club. And it was always sort of a laugh for all of us, because everybody would complain if we were overloaded with bombs, that we couldn't get off the ground. But they'd never throw a case of whiskey out.

JH: (chuckles)

MILLER: And there were several times when we took off (commences to laugh) the runway there in Cairo and we actually just practically flew right down through the streets because we were so heavily loaded we

- MILLER: couldn't get any . . . we couldn't get the aircraft in the air. (laughs heartily) And there would be goats and chickens and people just going every which way 'cause they thought this thing was coming in on them.
- JH: (joins in the laughter)
- MILLER: Oh, dear. Those were . . . they weren't care-free days in many ways. (laughs)
- JH: Well, what took you into actual combat then, now?
- MILLER: Well, the bombardment group then was raiding . . . I flew the last raids at Ploesti, for example -- the oil fields, before they fell to the Russians. Our squadron had almost a 200% turnover on Ploesti. We lost that many people over that period of year. Now, we got in on the last of the raids on Ploesti. We supported . . . we would bomb the ammunition dumps in Greece and Yugoslavia to support the partisan outfits there, the guerilla groups that were fighting on our side. And we knew a lot of these fellows because they were based at a little town called Bari, B-a-r-i, on the Italian heel. We were at Taranto, and these Greek raiders that were outfitted -- primarily by the British -- with high-speed boats and things would go there. We all had the same officers' club.
- JH: Oh, you did?
- MILLER: In Bari, yeah. Everybody shared the same place you know -- the British and the Greeks and the French.
- JH: Was there . . .
- MILLER: There weren't too many French.
- JH: . . . good relationship between all of you?
- MILLER: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It's the nice thing about drinking ouzo. No one can make a fist. (both laugh) No one could get mad.
- JH: A little ouzo and you're all tame.

MILLER: And we were flying . . . the particularly difficult target was Blechhammer. And that had to be in Austria over toward the Russian border because it fell to the Russians while I was there. And that was a great relief to everybody.

We were shot down in Vienna and Vienna was the synthetic oil capital. It was to synthetic oil what Ploesti was to real oil.

JH: What were the circumstances surrounding your actual being . . . actually being shot down?

MILLER: Well, we . . . you would make these raids and . . . let's start back even a little further. You'd wake at about three in the morning and you'd go to the briefing room. You'd get dressed and go to the briefing room where they would brief you on the target for today. And this was done It all seems so antique now in comparison to what we have available because it was big charts and maps and the lighting was very low, you know. The capability of generating electricity was not nearly what we have as a capability now. So many advances have been made. And they would try to brief you on the weather. Weather information was very spotty. It was not a science nearly to the extent that it was 40 years later, practically. And they would tell you that beyond a certain point you couldn't have radio communication back /to the base/ because it would be too monitored, you know. They couldn't . . . we could have radio communication between aircraft.

You would then go to breakfast and those that were religious went to their little church services for the last rites and things of that nature. And then we'd go out by jeep. You'd pick up your 'chute and you'd go out by jeep to the aircraft in the dark. It was usually cold and an Italian wet. It wasn't snow but it was not a very comfortable climate even in the wintertime, in the wintertime particularly.

JH: Now, what time of year would this be? This was winter?

MILLER: Oh, this would have been . . . yeah, this would have been starting October. I think we started flying missions in September or October and we went

MILLER: through January. And then we were shot down in February.

You'd climb aboard the aircraft, and you'd . . . they'd have a little generator to start your first engine. At a certain time you'd start that first engine -- at a pre-arranged time that everybody was agree on -- and you'd hear this whole airdrome just come alive with engines, you know, because there were four squadrons to a group.

JH: How many planes does this mean then?

MILLER: Well, this would . . . if there were eight planes to ten planes to a squadron, then you'd have 32 planes to the group. And then the group would form . . . there were six groups to the wing, you know. And you'd begin to start one engine after the other, and then you'd see a flare go up from the tower. And the flare meant that the first squadron started to move up behind the squadron leader.

I had gone over with a captain as a copilot. And then he was taken away very quickly because he had quite a bit of experience. Then I got another copilot and I became the primary pilot.

You were assigned a position. The day we were shot down we were flying the deputy lead for the group. We were right off the right wing of the lead aircraft. This was more significant for our bombardier than it was for anything else. It just meant that if . . . everybody dropped on the first bombardier. Even though every plane had a bombardier, everybody was tracking the first bombardier trigger because he was the man with most experience. So everybody dropped on him unless there was something that was just so far off that every plane had to go off on their own.

Anyway, these planes would begin to line up. You'd begin to move in and this was all done in darkness with very wee little lights so that you weren't distinguishable, you know. And you'd take off one at a time. There's something about a prop /propellor/ engine that has an entirely different sound to it than a . . . it's a rougher sound than a jet. A jet has a whine to it, but a prop engine

MILLER: really sort of bites at the air, you know. And you'd get all these aircraft -- 30 to 40 aircraft -- strung out. And they'd all be taking off on what were these steel mat runways and crushed rock runways, you know. And you'd wait until the last . . . until the fellow cleared the end of the runway before you started your run. And it was very tricky because you'd get caught in the turbulence of that prop and you had to be very much on your aircraft.

And then you'd form into squadrons. The first fellow would turn in long and the next one would turn in a little shorter. And everybody would be turning in in a tighter and tighter turn until you formed your formation. And then once you got your formation and the other four were in formation -- the other four squadrons -- why then you'd form into your group of . . . which was the same delta thing. And this thing began to get very big. And then you'd form into the wing of four groups. And pretty soon you'd look out as the sun came up and you'd see 3,000 aircraft all heading in the same direction.

JH: Good grief!

MILLER: Just like a wave of predatory birds, you know. And it was a long flight. Most of the flights were 16 hours. They were long flights.

JH: Sixteen hours! And you had to be on it and alert and . . .

MILLER: That's right.

JH: . . . with it.

MILLER: All that time.

Now, you were covered by fighter until you got very much to the Austrian border. Then some of the long-range fighters could go in with you, but they wouldn't go . . . they wouldn't stick over the target. You . . . everybody came in on what they called an initial point. Wave after wave would maneuver out, and they'd come in on an initial point on which everybody would then turn and start the bomb run down because we were after an objective. Well, by the time that the second

MILLER: squadron or the second group, let's say, was on its way (laughs) in, why the Germans knew very well what we were after and they had brought then all of their anti-aircraft to bear so that the sky would just literally turn black in front of you. And they would be searching for altitude and searching for hits. And they would just . . . they would put up this barrage that you had to fly through. And we were hit a number of times. You could hear it go through the aircraft.

Now, the pilots were back in sort of mummy cases of very heavy steel. We were back, pushed into these things so that we had some protection from this.

The gunners were probably the most exposed in this sense. We were hit with such a direct hit that there was no chance of doing anything with the aircraft at all.

JH: Now, can you describe for us your feelings at this point? In retrospect, can you reconstruct?

MILLER: Yeah, it's . . . yeah, it has remained very clear in my mind. We were going along and suddenly I was aware of the silence as though we were gliding. All the engines had stopped, evidently. They had . . . what had happened is that they had hit us right in the middle of the bomb bays, and we were still wired. We were still loaded, so in the next few minutes then the yellow smoke came up out of the bomb bays and into the cockpit and I knew that we were on fire. And then there was this explosion which you never heard. It was just a force. You could feel the puff. And I . . . we went . . . the aircraft just jumped and went up in the air and it flipped over. And I remember it sort of coming when we started down in a spin. And this was a huge aircraft. I could see the other aircraft trying to get out of its way -- the other aircraft in the formation trying to make room for it to go down through.

By this time both the copilot and myself were out of our harnesses. Now, the thing that was very fortunate for me, as I mentioned, I was undersized to fly the plane. And I was wearing a 'chute

MILLER: because I was too small to get up toward the pedals. And so the 'chute being . . . I took my chances and said, I've got to have something to push me out of that big metal piece (laughs) back there because I can't reach the pedals on this aircraft as conveniently as I could. The 'chute helped with that.

So, I had mine on. The rest of the crew had what they called chest 'chutes. They had the harnesses on, but they had to pick up a pack and they had to snap it on the front of them.

JH: So, they didn't customarily wear this all the time?

MILLER: So . . . no. And the poor gunners were trapped in the gun emplacements, and I'm sure that they never even got out of the gun emplacements. That was just . . . the aircraft was being in such a violent set of reactions by this time.

I can remember cold air coming in, and I thought to myself the canopy has blown off. And the only other thing that I thought was, you know, I just wonder what's going to happen to my mother because I was an only child and for some reason the thought of death itself, I was not afraid. Things were happening too quickly, I think. You just almost accepted it as inevitable, you know. We've been hit; we're going down. And you wondered how . . . and I'm sure that probably every man on that ship thought of his wife or something of the same kind.

JH: Yeah. And since your father was long gone . . .

MILLER: Yeah.

JH: . . . she would be alone.

MILLER: Yeah, she would be alone.

So, that's where my thoughts were. Then I passed out from lack of oxygen. And what happened, I can only surmise. The fresh air that I felt was the fact that the canopy by this time had been wrenched off, and I just fell out of the aircraft in one of these violent twists that it went through,