

Transcript: Charlie Tibbets

Today is Thursday, May 10, 2012. My name is James Crabtree. This morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Charlie Tibbets. This interview is being conducted at the William Courtney Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and is in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's an honor for me and for our program. Sir, the first question I almost always like to start out with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Charlie Tibbets: I was raised during the Depression. It was kind of rough. Nothing great happened.

Were you born in Texas?

Charlie Tibbets: I was born in El Centro, California.

El Centro. I know right where that is. I drove through there last week, actually, coming back from San Diego.

Charlie Tibbets: About 50, 40 feet below sea level.

That's right. Did you grow up on a farm?

Charlie Tibbets: No. Well, yeah, part of the time. My dad, we moved a lot. My dad was a car salesman. I lived on a farm for a while, on a ranch.

How long did you live in El Centro?

Charlie Tibbets: Just a baby.

Just a baby? Okay. What type of cars did your dad sell?

Charlie Tibbets: Used cars always.

Used cars, yeah. Are those your first memories then, during the '30s, the Depression, and that sort of thing?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, we lived in Kenosha, Wisconsin, for about four years. I remember that. I remember I threw an apple through the window and I got a whippin' for it.

How old were you when World War II started?

Charlie Tibbets: When did it start, in '41?

'41, end of '41.

Charlie Tibbets: Well, let's see. I was born in '24. About 16 or 17, I guess.

Did you think, at that point when the war started, that there was a good chance you'd be going into the war yourself?

Charlie Tibbets: When they started drafting, I knew I would.

Yeah. So it was just a matter of a couple of years. So when you hit 18, I guess, you got drafted?

Charlie Tibbets: Yes.

Where did you go at that point? For your training?

Charlie Tibbets: I went to Fort Sam Houston and got my hair cut off and all my clothes issued. And taking a whole bunch of tests and went to Miami Beach, Florida, for basic training. While I was there, I got spinal meningitis. Dying like flies. Then I went to . . . I spent a month in the hospital. Then got out, they sent me back to my hotel, and then burned everything I had. All my clothes and everything, thinking that stuff was contagious. If I'd had 10 dollars, I'd come home. Then they sent me to Goldsboro, North Carolina. Seymour Johnson. To the flight engineering school. The B-26s.

That's still there. Seymour Johnson Air Force Base.

Charlie Tibbets: We have a woman that works here that's from there.

Really?

Charlie Tibbets: I don't remember how long. About eight months, I guess. Then I went to Fort Myers, Florida, for gunnery school. And I flew top turret gunner.

Top turret gunner. On B-29s?

Charlie Tibbets: Six.

B-26.

Charlie Tibbets: Then I went to Shreveport, Louisiana. Barksdale.

And that's still there today too.

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. And we got put on crews and we were sent to Lake Charles, Louisiana, for practice with the crews. While we there, my pilot got sick, the one I was assigned. And they put me with another crew. We flew for . . . I don't know how long we were there. I was there in '44. I know. I got a picture of it. After we got set up . . . There were six of us. I had a real good crew. Three of us are still living and we stay in contact. We were totally little brothers. We went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, to go overseas. We went over to Pontoise, France. It took us eight days to go. Then to Glasgow, Scotland. From there, we went up the coast to London, and we were there just a week or two. They sent a couple of crews over to France. Pontoise. Set up tents for the rest to come in. After we left, buzz bomb hit the mess hall. We were there for France. We got there. Went overseas in September of '40, '43, I guess. '44, I guess. September of '44. We got our camp all set up and everything. I flew 45 missions.

All on B-26s?

Charlie Tibbets: Yes. I was flight engineer on B-26s. Our pilot had his 21st birthday five days after our first mission.

His 26th birthday?

Charlie Tibbets: First.

21st? Wow. Very young.

Charlie Tibbets: Oh, we were all just kids. Not old enough to be scared.

How many men were in your crew?

Charlie Tibbets: Six.

Six-man crew.

Charlie Tibbets: We had a real good crew. We got along real good and everything. Two missions really stand out. One, we took off, and the pilot pulled the landing gear, and the tire blew out. I mean, it made a loud noise. You could hear it in the plane. Went ahead and flew the mission and radioed the tower, "We had a tire blew out." So they asked him to lower the landing gear and he did. They looked at it and said, "Well, it looks all right." So we landed, taxied up to where we were supposed to park it. And what had happened, when he pulled the landing gear, the plane had settled, and the prop hit the ground right there on the runway. Bent all four blades.

Wow.

Charlie Tibbets: They didn't vibrate, in any event. Back to about where the yellow strip is on. And another time, we were flying on a mission, and the first flak got one of our engines. I don't remember the left or right. I believe it was the left. We had to drop out of formation because the other plane behind us would run over us. He hollered at the bombardier to unload the bomb. He hollered, "Bomb bay door's open. Bombs away. Close the door." He called me up to the front to try to bring __. When I started up there, the bombs had never fell. One on each side had hung. We had the __ in 'em __. You're supposed be able to pull the pin on the bomb. The pins were pulled.

So they were alive.

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. And we don't know if they're going off out of the __ concussion or what. So I asked him to feather that engine and let me kick those bombs out. To the __ of my feet.

How big are these bombs? Give us an idea how much they weigh.

Charlie Tibbets: I don't remember. Maybe 250-pound bombs. So I held my feet, held out under the catwalk and kicked them out on both sides. Then we close the bomb bay door and made it home okay.

Wow. That was a little hair-raising. So you did 45 missions. How long were you with the same crew? Did they rotate men out?

Charlie Tibbets: No.

Same crew?

Charlie Tibbets: Same crew.

For 45 missions.

Charlie Tibbets: After 30 missions, you'd get a flight leave. Sent us to Southport, England. Wasn't no one there but us. Five of us. Our bombardier, the navigator, they put him somewhere else. But there was five of us GIs and a great big hotel. Nothing to do. It was in April of '44.

'44.

Charlie Tibbets: '44, maybe '45, I don't remember. Anyway, there was a good town there about 10 miles. And while we were gone, my outfit moved from France to Belgium. Well, officers went ahead with their group and us three gunners were in our group. I don't remember how we got back to Belgium. But anyway, we got back to Belgium and we were broke, tired, all the clothes were dirty. Had been gone about 12, 15 days. We stayed at the provost marshal's office. I walked by the area and there was a Jeep from my outfit. I went inside and checked on it, and the CO had sent him up there to pick us up, but they didn't give him a pass. So they had him locked up and been AWOL. So I had to sign a bunch of papers to get him out. My responsibility.

Yeah. Did your plane have a name?

Charlie Tibbets: No.

Never named it?

Charlie Tibbets: Several people flew that same plane.

Okay, I see. So they rotated the crews.

Charlie Tibbets: But we used the same plane every time. See you don't fly every day.

Sure. How often would you fly? Every other day? Every third day?

Charlie Tibbets: I don't know. Two or three times. Wasn't that often. Flew 45 missions. During the Battle of the Bulge, in December '44, I had my 21st birthday. In the flight leave. In December of '44, we had the weather come in. Bad. Ice. _ . We couldn't take off, so when the weather did break, we had to fly two missions a day. Get us up about 3 o'clock in the morning. Eat breakfast, and go to briefing. Take off and come back and they'd have sandwiches for us. Reload and take off again. Them poor fellows up at the front, man, they were surrounded, no ammunition, no food or anything. Some things that happened over there. We was in the 344 Bomb Group, 496th Squadron. And some second lieutenant got a wild idea about going to Reims to pick up some champagne at five dollars a bottle. They give you about a fifth of White Horse scotch every month, the Army did. Air Force. Well, everybody wanted some champagne so we give him the money, five dollars, and he was from a different squadron. He run into a tree, developed amnesia, and don't remember what happened to the money or anything else. Got ripped off.

Yeah.

Charlie Tibbets: The other time a major come by . . .

He told you he ran into a tree or . . . ?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah, never did see him anymore after that.

Oh, he ran off with it. Yeah, geez.

Charlie Tibbets: A major come by, start with the Air Force Aid Society, \$50 for lifetime or \$5 to join, so mimeographed the receipt. You would bring it back to the States and they would recognize it and give you a phone. Well, everybody paid him. Got back to the States, nobody knew anything about it.

Yeah.

Charlie Tibbets: And another time, we got ready to come home, we were . . . They were debating whether to send us by ship or by plane. We finally wound up by plane. We got back to England, to London, and they had a big truck full of 10-dollar bills. They would take all your French money and convert it back to American, but all they had was 10-dollar bills. If you had \$99.99 worth of French money, they've give you nine 10-dollar bills. You'd sign a piece of paper and get back to the States. Nobody knew anything about it.

Yeah, so you're losing money.

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. They ripped us off pretty good.

Yeah, sounds like it.

Charlie Tibbets: And we flew back, we got to Iceland, and the fog come in. Then that fog, you couldn't see your hand in front of it. It come in all at once. We were there about 15 days, 16 days.

Just fogged in?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. You couldn't take off. Then we took off when the weather did break, and I bought a wool sweater, turtleneck sweater. And I got home and my head wouldn't go through it. And I bought it. So we got home and we landed at Goose Bay up in Canada. What's the name of it, Goose Bay something. Anyway, remain overnight.

I know Nova Scotia's out there, Newfoundland.

Charlie Tibbets: They . . . The engine, one of the engines was leaking oil. Well, the crew chief, and I stayed with him, we worked on that thing all night, got it fixed. The next day we . . . We got our clothes all oily and so we didn't have any to change in so we took 'em off, washed 'em in gas, 120-octane gas, fanned 'em and got 'em dry, put 'em on and they like to eat us up. And we got back to the States, I had athlete's foot, and they give me some salicylic acid, 'course it's gonna burn, and, man, it did. I never had athlete's foot since then.

Yeah.

Charlie Tibbets: And this, let me see, went back, got 30-day leave, went out to Humble Oil at Baytown, and I was still in the service. They said, "We'll hire you when you get out."

That's great. Let me ask you, sir, to go back. Where were you living when you got drafted?

Charlie Tibbets: Houston.

You were in Houston, okay. So, you're on leave so you basically went back to Houston or Baytown area. I was going to ask you too. What was a typical type of mission for you and your crew to fly, or was there a typical mission?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, we were medium bombers. Ten thousand feet is critical altitude. We flew between 10 and 12 thousand feet, and we didn't have the range the heavies did. We'd fly about 12,000 feet, about three or four hours. And you'd give out and got back.

Did you have any experience with enemy fighters?

Charlie Tibbets: No, we never were jumped by fighters. But flak, man, that flak would eat us up. Our plane sometimes looked like a sieve but neither one of us got a scratch.

Very lucky. Did you have a lot of fighter escort provided to you?

Charlie Tibbets: Yes, we did. P-47 mostly.

Okay, yeah.

Charlie Tibbets: See, that B-26 has a Pratt & Whitney 2800 engine, and that P-47 just half of a B-26, and Curtiss electric prop.

Did you like the B-26?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, that's the only one I knew, but it was a good plane. You needed to fly it. It wouldn't fly itself.

Yeah. What do you think were the best and worst characteristics of it?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, its dependability. It'd fly on one engine. One time I'd have to come in on one engine if we were running low on fuel. Transfer all the fuel to that engine. Dependable ship.

Yeah. What about on the negative side? Was there anything that stood out?

Charlie Tibbets: Not to me there wasn't.

That's great. So, after the war ended . . . Where were you, first of all, when the war ended?

Charlie Tibbets: I was in Belgium.

You're in Belgium, yeah. What was that day like when you learned that the war in Europe was over?

Charlie Tibbets: Oh, I don't know remember. We knew it was coming. It was close.

Once it was over, was it a long time before you were able to come back home to the States or pretty quick?

Charlie Tibbets: Pretty quick. I had a . . .

Because they had the point system, right?

Charlie Tibbets: I had over 100 points.

Yeah, having flown 45 missions, I would think you'd be up there in points.

Charlie Tibbets: I forget how many points for each mission. Let's see, 60 points was a tour. And the war ended before I got my tour but that was all right.

Yeah. So, you got back home and I assume you went back to Houston and went to work for Humble Oil.

Charlie Tibbets: The only job I had.

That's great.

Charlie Tibbets: They retired me in '72. In '67 I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis from a disease I had . . .

When you were in training down in Florida?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah, my temperature got so high, it burnt the matting off my nerves. I never could walk straight after that happened. Marching, they'd put me at the tail end because I kept bumping everybody else.

Yeah. Did they ever determine how you got that? Because you were in Miami Beach, right, when that happened?

Charlie Tibbets: They had an epidemic of it. They's dying like flies.

So it was just . . .

Charlie Tibbets: All the medicine they had for it was sulfa drug.

So it was just in the air I guess.

Charlie Tibbets: I don't know.

I think you mentioned you kept in pretty good touch with some of the men you served with on your crew. Out of the six, did you all stay in good contact?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, by telephone. My pilot, my copilot lives in Austin. He come to see me several times. My pilot lived in the suburbs of Chicago. He come down, oh, several years ago. He went back to college and started a consulting engineering firm, and he and his wife went back over to Europe for three weeks, took a tour where we used to be.

Oh really?

Charlie Tibbets: At Pontoise, wasn't anything then. There's over two million people there now. And he took a tour where we were, to Belgium and everything. We were in Belgium, we weren't too far from Brussels, further than we were from Paris, but not that much. We'd get a pass into Brussels once in a while.

That's great.

Charlie Tibbets: And then Belgium, most everybody spoke English, and there's a hedger all the way around Belgium.

What about the other men in your crew? Did you stay in good contact with them?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. My radio operator had cancer of the bone, and he worked for the VA. My tail gunner, Harry __, had some growth on his brain. I haven't called him in a couple months. I don't know if he's still living or not.

Yes sir.

Charlie Tibbets: My pilot, well, he was gonna come down to see me here not too long ago. He has a son in Austin. He asked me how far it was and I said about 50 or 60 miles, and he said, "Well, I'll come see you."

Yeah, that's not a bad drive. I actually work in Austin so I came up today.

Charlie Tibbets: Something happened and he couldn't make it. See, he's old. He's about 89, and that's getting up in years.

Sure. You said your copilot lives in Austin too, right?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah, he's dead.

Oh, he died, okay.

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. He had leukemia.

Yes sir.

Charlie Tibbets: He got called back in the Korean War. He stayed in, my lieutenant colonel.

Wow.

Charlie Tibbets: The pilot stayed in the Reserve but he didn't have to go over.

Yes sir. When was it that, I think you mentioned you got out in '45. So once the war was over, you went ahead and got out of the service?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah. Wasn't my cup of tea.

Yeah. Were you married during the war?

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah.

You were. What was that like for your wife, you being overseas?

Charlie Tibbets: I don't know. I wasn't there. Rough, there with her parents.

Yeah, were you able to write to her?

Charlie Tibbets: Oh yeah.

How long would it take to get a letter from home?

Charlie Tibbets: Oh, I don't remember, week or two I think. It weren't overnight.

No, absolutely. No phone calls, no email, that's right. Did you ever have any experience with any of the prisoners of war?

Charlie Tibbets: No. Well, I'd see the American prisoners coming back, this is Belgium. Man, they're just skin and bones. And they'd land at our place and we'd feed 'em. Man, it'd just tear you up, seeing those boys.

I bet.

Charlie Tibbets: Americans taking the Germans and bringing 'em over here. When we landed at Goose Bay, Labrador, one of those German prisoners, great big fat fellow, come up and asked one of the GIs for a cigarette. He dumped his plate, he would've cut his head off if we'd not have stopped him. Said, "I was fighting you a week ago, and then you come back and ask me for a cigarette?"

Yeah.

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah, this fat, well taken care of.

Yeah. I can definitely understand that. So you were in Houston all those years, retired from Humble Oil?

Charlie Tibbets: In Baytown.

Baytown, okay.

Charlie Tibbets: I worked for 'em 27 years and they retired me on a medical the end of '72.

And then when did you come here to Temple?

Charlie Tibbets: About August of '72.

Moved up to Temple. And how long have you been here at the Courtney Home?

Charlie Tibbets: Little over nine years.

Nine years?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, March of 2003.

How do you like it?

Charlie Tibbets: I like it. It's a good place.

Good. Food's pretty good I guess?

Charlie Tibbets: Well, for . . . Yeah, it is.

That's good.

Charlie Tibbets: The old boy's over the kitchen is superb. I mean, he'll work with you any way to get what you like to eat.

That's good. I could imagine, you know, having to feed so many people, I would think it's a challenge.

Charlie Tibbets: Well, he's been in that business in the Army.

Yeah, okay. So he knows how to do it then. That's great. Well, sir, I don't know if I mentioned to you before we started but, you know, at the Land Office we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the original registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of all the original settlers in Texas. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. And our goal is to take these interviews and add them into the archive so that hundreds of years from now, people can listen to these interviews and maybe learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to someone listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone?

Charlie Tibbets: The people that we have in the service now are different than we went in in World War II. We were coming out of the Depression and didn't have too much to eat when we's home. We got in the service and got something to eat and everything, and we knew how to work. But they could not bring the draft back now, not with technology they have with all these computers and everything. It wouldn't work. And the fellas now have it so much worse than what we did by the new technology and the new artilleries and everything and bombs. I think that got it worse than we did because some things are sophisticated, buzz bombs, I mean . . .

Yeah, the gadgetry and stuff is more difficult, but I think you all definitely served in some pretty tough places.

Charlie Tibbets: Oh yeah.

The fact that you completed 45 missions in World War II over Europe is quite an accomplishment. You know, I don't know what the survivability was for a bomber crew but I don't think it was anywhere close to averaging 45 missions.

Charlie Tibbets: Well, the heavies, the 17 and 24s, I think 25 was the, maybe 30. And you'd see those 17s laying on the ground, been shot down, and the crew I'm sure had been killed or captured. And it makes you kinda wonder.

Yeah, it was definitely a tough job that you and your crewmates were in.

Charlie Tibbets: Yeah, that flak, if you ever smell it, you never forget it. Fly through that smoke, like smelling flesh burn. If you ever smell it, you never forget it. And it has kind of a sweet odor. And if it bursts right by you, nine times out of 10 you wouldn't get any holes. But if it's out there a few feet, you're fixing to get some holes. We've had 'em burst where they'd shake the plane. We didn't get anything else.

Why do you think that was, that it would . . . ?

Charlie Tibbets: I have no idea.

That's interesting. Well, sir, I really do appreciate you taking the time to share a little of your stories with us this morning. Commissioner Patterson is a veteran, and I'm a vet but everybody at the Land Office is appreciative of what you've done for our country. This program is just a very small way of saying thank you for your service. In about a week or two, we're going to send you a package that has a bunch of copies of this interview on CDs along with a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson in a commemorative binder. If your friends or family want any extra copies, just give me a call, and we'll be glad to make more free copies and send them to you. So, it's a small way of saying thanks.

Charlie Tibbets: I appreciate the opportunity to do this.

Yes sir. Well, I enjoy the privilege of being able to talk to you about your service just like I did with the other gentleman this morning. It all kind of comes together like a patchwork quilt, I think. People get to hear all these different stories. They realize that, as we say in the program, every veteran has a story to tell. Every story is a little bit unique but there's kind of a common thread or common theme that runs through most of them about service and what that means. There's definitely a lot that folks can learn from it because obviously the average person has no concept of what it's like to serve or to go into combat or, especially in your case, to fly missions over Europe during the war and be shot upon and that sort of thing. So, I think it's definitely a benefit for folks to be able to hear it. So, again, sir, thank you very, very much.

Charlie Tibbets: Thank you very much.