Transcription: Donald Landrum

My name is Tom Cengel. I'm with the General Land Office. Today is Thursday, April 17, 2008. It's approximately 1:45 in the afternoon, and I am interviewing Mr. Don Landrum by telephone interview. I'm located at the General Land Office and Mr. Landrum is at his home. The interview is in support of the Voices of Veterans Program of the State of Texas Veterans Land Board. The purpose is to create a permanent record of the military service experiences of veterans. Mr. Landrum, as you know, I'm about to interview you relating to your military experiences.

Donald Landrum: Yes sir.

The interview is by telephone and I will be using a tape recorder to record this interview. The interview will be transcribed and made into a permanent record at the Veterans Land Board in Austin, Texas. Does the Veterans Land Board have your permission and consent to conduct this interview and make it a part of the permanent records of the Veterans Land Board? We have your permission?

Donald Landrum: Yes.

And also, Ms. ___ who is the reporter from the Austin American-Statesman is listening in and taking notes. She has a headphone on and is going to be taking notes for this. Does she have permission to listen in and take notes relative to this?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir.

And would the Austin American-Statesman also have your consent and permission to use this interview as part of a newspaper article if they so choose?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir.

Okay. The purpose of this interview is to record your recollections of your military experience. We will follow somewhat a question and answer format but please feel free to expand on your answers and add anything that you think might be helpful in refreshing your recollections so that future generations will have the opportunity to know what it was like for you during your military life and how those experiences shaped your life since then. We understand that some of your experiences may be difficult to discuss and, if so, you are free to limit the interview to the extent you are comfortable in relating the experiences. Are we ready to proceed?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir.

Okay. Let's start with the basics. Could you give me your name and your present address?

Donald Landrum: My name is Donald Lee Landrum. Of course, they call me Don. They put that handle on me a long time ago. I live at 1920 North Jackson in Palestine, Texas.

Okay, and the zip of that is 75801. What is your age, sir?

Donald Landrum: Eighty-five. I'll be eighty-six if I make it to October.

Okay, you will. I'd like to get some family information. Can you tell me something about your family history from your parents to the present?

Donald Landrum: Well, of course, I grew up in Cherokee County in the little town of Alto.

Alto?

Donald Landrum: On 125-acre farm. And I was one of seven boys, and I had three sisters. There was 10 in my family.

Wow.

Donald Landrum: And, of course, we well remember the depression. I'm sure that happened before your time. We farmed, raised cotton and corn and stuff, had our own animals, chickens and stuff. We made it pretty good. The depression was bad on everybody except we managed pretty good. My father was a carpenter. He kept some kind of little ol' job during that depression. He turned the farm over to us boys and we made out pretty good. I got out of school. I went to trade school. College was out so back in those days they just stressed a trade of some kind. So I spent 18 months in a trade school.

And where was that at?

Donald Landrum: In Woodlake, Texas, in Trinity County, in 1941.

Do you remember the name of the school?

Donald Landrum: Well, it was ___ National Youth Administration.

Okay.

Donald Landrum: It was all over the state, you know?

It was a sponsored school then? Government?

Donald Landrum: Yes. We had supervisors, A&M graduate supervisors. Had about 150 boys in this camp, and it was a well-run camp.

What years would that have been?

Donald Landrum: This was in the late '40 and early '41.

Okay, and you were how old at that time?

Donald Landrum: I was 17. I turned 18 in 1941 I believe it was. I was born in '22 so you figure it out.

So did you go through high school?

Donald Landrum: Yes.

What high school did you go to?

Donald Landrum: Alto. I lacked a little bit to finishing because I wanted to get in the service. You know what I mean? I didn't get my diploma.

So how old were you then when you entered the military?

Donald Landrum: I was 20. I was 19 when I enlisted in October of '42 but I had my 20th birthday before they called me, 'cause there's a lot of 'em enlisting in those days and I was in Houston, Texas, and at that time you could enlist and be sent to Ellington Field. But I was one of 'em that didn't get to go to Ellington Field. I didn't see Ellington Field until I got out of the service.

When you entered the military, you joined the Army Air Corps?

Donald Landrum: Army Air Corps, yes sir. Enlisted and I was inducted on the 5th of November 1942.

Fifth of November, 1942.

Donald Landrum: I went to Dodd Field in San Antonio and within the week of shots and haircuts and so forth, we began our basic training.

Okay, so you went in about a year after Pearl Harbor?

Donald Landrum: Pearl Harbor was in December . . .

Of '41, right?

Donald Landrum: Of '41, and I went in in November of '42.

So do you recall where you were on December 7th, 1941?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir. I was working at the Forum Cafeteria in Houston.

I'm sorry, which cafeteria?

Donald Landrum: Forum, it was a chain operated cafeteria. They had several of 'em

And what were you doing there?

Donald Landrum: I was a head fry cook.

Do you recall the day?

Donald Landrum: You bet. It was early in the morning on a Sunday morning. They announced it on the radio 'cause back in those days there wasn't any television, you know.

Right. Did you anticipate something like that coming or happening? Were you shocked?

Donald Landrum: Well, things were beginning to change but I didn't think it was gonna be that soon, and I didn't have any idea that it would be in that manner. You know what I mean.

Yes.

Donald Landrum: But I was like several others. I was wanting to get in the service and do my thing. You know what I mean. I didn't want to hang around.

Why did you choose the Army Air Corps?

Donald Landrum: Well, I was rooming with a friend and he wanted to join the Air Corps, and I preferred that over other branches of the service.

Did you have any previous experience with flying?

Donald Landrum: No sir.

So you'd never been up in the air but I guess you wanted to.

Donald Landrum: Well, I just kind of always admired the airplanes. You know what I mean. Our farm was right on the line between Randolph Field and Shreverport, Louisiana, so we used to watch the planes. They'd come right over our fields. And I always looked up and admired those people, and I guess I was impressed enough to kind of want to get in the Air Force.

Okay, so you did. And after you enlisted, it was a while before they actually called you in?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, I went in in November of '42 and, of course, took my basic. Left there and went to airplane mechanic school at ____

Excuse me. Where was your basic at?

Donald Landrum: At SAACC. San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center, Kelly Field.

Okay, Kelly Field.

Donald Landrum: Yes sir.

And how long did that take you?

Donald Landrum: About 13 weeks we was there.

And that was the basic training. Physical training and . . .

Donald Landrum: Drilling and so forth.

So you probably didn't spend a lot of time learning about airplanes during much of that.

Donald Landrum: Not then, no.

Did you have your choice as to what you wanted to do while you were in basic training? Did the Army Air Corps give you an opportunity to do what you wanted to do or did they tell you what you were going to do?

Donald Landrum: Well, they made it available and you'd have a choice of trying to become an instructor in the school or you could go on and get on a crew. You know what I mean?

So what school did you go to?

Donald Landrum: We went to Gulfport, Mississippi.

Gulfport, Mississippi.

Donald Landrum: We were supposed to have gone to ____ Field but they were so crowded, we had to go to this other field, and that was a six-month course in aircraft engineering, mechanic. And that's what I was. They called us aero engineers. That what the titles were.

Okay, and you were there for six months.

Donald Landrum: Six months, and I left there and went to the factory school in Willow Run, Michigan.

The what school?

Donald Landrum: The factory school. That's where they built B-24s.

Oh, okay.

Donald Landrum: Henry Ford changed his Ford plant into making B-24s.

Right.

Donald Landrum: Several thousand people employed there. And we went there on a 90-day to see the very beginning to the end of the construction of a B-24.

Wow. So that was a part of your training, was to actually go to the factory where they were building B-24s?

Donald Landrum: Right.

Since you were going to be a mechanic, it only makes sense that you would go see them from the ground up being built.

Donald Landrum: We left there and went to Harlingen, Texas, to gunnery school.

Okay, before you go to gunnery school, tell us a little bit about what the B-24 was because some folks may not know what a B-24 was.

Donald Landrum: Well, the B-24 was, more or less replaced the fortress, the B-17. It was a little bit larger plane. It had a little bit more horsepower. We carried a bigger bomb load, and go further on fuel than the 17, so back in those days, the idea was to get there first with the most. And it was a very good, safe airplane.

What was the size of the crew?

Donald Landrum: Ten. Ten men, four officers and six enlisted men. Had four turrets, one in the upper, tail turret gunner, nose turret gunner, and the spare vault turret gunner. And then the radio operator and myself. We manned a caliber 50 waist gun, caliber 50.

Okay, so it's four engine, radial engines.

Donald Landrum: Pratt & Whitney engines. Twelve hundred horsepower each one of 'em.

So you went for 90 days was that, at the factory?

Donald Landrum: About 90 days.

From there, where did you go?

Donald Landrum: Gunnery school, Harlingen, Texas.

Really? Okay. And how long did you spend there?

Donald Landrum: We's in there about 90 days, somewhere along there.

Okay, and what exactly did they train you to do?

Donald Landrum: Well, getting familiar with machine guns, caliber 30s, and, of course, the B-24 had caliber 50s. We had to learn all about those, how to maintain them and how to use 'em and so forth. We fired the caliber 30s at a tow target pulled by the goony bird, C-47, the sock we called it. And these AT6 training planes was converted to the training planes to carrying the gunner so the pilot set in the front and the back seat was rigged up for a gunner. It had caliber 50 machine guns, 30 caliber machine gun, and you'd fire at this sock that's being towed out there. You'd ride along parallel with it to about 50 yards from it, and each gunner had color projector so when the bullet went through that sock, it left your color on it.

That's how you knew you hit it.

Donald Landrum: That way they knew how many out of the 200 rounds you fired, they could tell how many that I shot and how many my buddy behind me shot.

So this was in AT6 which is a single engine . . .

Donald Landrum: AT6 trainer plane, uh-huh.

That's a single engine, two place . . .

Donald Landrum: Yeah, pretty hot little plane, 650 horsepower.

I know. I had a neighbor who used to take me flying in his.

Donald Landrum: It was a good plane.

Yes it was.

Donald Landrum: It would fool you.

Okay, so you learned actually to be a gunner in a single-engine plane as opposed to in the bomber itself?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, in the beginning, uh-huh.

Okay, so you went through the 90 days for qualification there. Anything that you remember particularly interesting about that period while you were going through gunnery school?

Donald Landrum: No, not anything particular. Just that everything was up front. You had to just get off the butt and get with it. You know what I mean? We enjoyed it. It was fun I thought.

Do you feel that the Army Air Corps adequately prepared you for what you had to do?

Donald Landrum: The pilots were supposed to take it easy with us, you know what I mean? But they'd give us a little thrill every once in a while. If you didn't have that safety belt on, it would probably fixed you out of it. Anyway, it was fun. I enjoyed it.

Did the military at that time while you were in training treat you well?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we were restricted to the post. We couldn't go to town or anything, and we didn't have very much of a social life at all, you know. We just went down there strictly. We shot skeet and clay pigeons, you know, with skeet shooting and trap. That was compulsory. We did that twice a week. The truck comes out with the pump or an automatic, whichever one you want to shoot at the skeet range.

So they were training you actually with shotguns to be good gunners?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, see how many clay pigeons you can knock down. So that was interesting too. And it was also, that was rattlesnake country down in there, and it got to be a joke of who could kill the biggest rattlesnake. So that was fun.

All right, so now you've become a mechanic, you've become qualified to be a gunner, and what came next?

Donald Landrum: Well, we left Harlingen and took a 10-day delay en route home. I stayed in Houston 10 days and went on, caught the train, went to Salt Lake City, Utah. That's where we formed our crew. That's where we met our pilot, copilot, bombardier, navigator, and we formed crews of 10 men there.

So this was actually the beginning of your experience.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we began our phase training from Salt Lake City, by train we went to Boise, Idaho. We's only in Salt Lake City about two weeks, and went on in to Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho.

Which field was that?

Donald Landrum: Gowen Field. We got in there in December of '43, and we began our phase training, what they called phase training.

And what did that consist of? What did phase training consist of?

Donald Landrum: Well, we had three phases, the beginning, and then we finally kind of graduated. They gave us a new plane when we got through and so forth, and we went to Lincoln, Nebraska _____ Before that though we went to _____ Nebraska and spent two months there

training, same thing. Just flying, navigation, checking and bombing, small bombs, you know, dropping on targets.

Yes.

Donald Landrum: And, of course, we had the Norden bombsight. That was top secret. We had orders to destroy it overseas if we crashed and we had the Norden bombsight on our plane, we had to destroy it 'cause it was top secret.

So this training then, you were actually starting to train and going through phases with a specific crew on a specific plane? Is that the case?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, that's the crew, yeah.

So you were becoming associated with a group of people that you would spend a lot of time with in the future?

Donald Landrum: Right, yes. We just learned to take care of each other, you know. We had to fly together and we got along all right, no problems.

So the 10 men that you basically trained with were the 10 men that you spent your combat time with?

Donald Landrum: Right, uh-huh.

So they put a crew together and kept a crew together through the time of training all the way through going overseas and going into combat.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we had all had about the same training, you know.

Your pilot was, from my little sheet here . . .

Donald Landrum: Lieutenant Tuttle.

Tuttle, Edwin Tuttle.

Donald Landrum: Edwin C. Tuttle.

And your copilot was Lawrence . . .

Donald Landrum: McGilfrey, yeah. We called him Mac. He was the only other Texan on the crew.

He was from Texas too?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, he was from Weatherford, I believe.

Oh, okay. He looks like a character from his photograph. Looks like he's got a big cigar in his mouth.

Donald Landrum: He was a big ol' boy.

Yeah, he sure was. And then your navigator was . . .?

Donald Landrum: Gallagher.

Frank Gallagher.

Donald Landrum: Frank E. Gallagher.

And the bombardier was Oscar . . .?

Donald Landrum: Rutstein, Oscar Rutstein.

I want to ask you something about that a little later, about Mr. Rutstein, in terms of when you were shot down and things, and remind me to do that. Okay, so all this time the war is going on, you're still in the United States training, knowing that you're going over there. At that period of time during 1943 and the early part of '44, the Army Air Corps bombing crews were suffering some horrendous losses over Europe. Were you hearing about that back in the States?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. Well, we didn't get the specifics on it but we knew that replacements were just every day in a bomb group. I know we used to, when we'd fly, we would, if the crew in the next tent wasn't flying, we would close and we would say, "In case I don't come back, why, call or write my wife," or something like that. You never knew whether you'd come back or not.

What were your feelings about getting ready to go over there and exposing yourself to that kind of danger?

Donald Landrum: Well, it's hard to explain. Patriotism was the name of the game. It was . . . Everybody wanted to go over there and kick some butt and get it over with. And I guess we the lead up with patriotism and it was a job that had to be done and we was trained to do it and we just didn't want to fail, you know.

So you were anxious to get into the fight?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir, I really was.

And I suppose most of your crew felt the same way.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, pretty well, yeah. We had what we call eager beavers.

Okay, any particular experiences while you were in the training before you went overseas that stand out in your mind?

Donald Landrum: Oh, well, we had a few things like night flying, training. Sometimes we'd lose an engine and come in and stuff like that. It was kind of exciting but luckily we made it all right.

Did you see any crashes or . . .?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we had some, yeah.

I understand there was a fairly high rate of accidents and crashes during flight training at that period of time.

Donald Landrum: We had some in our squadron. You know, taking off and coming in, that's when you get into danger is coming in or taking off. And we had some to crash coming in at different times.

Did you within yourself have fears of that happening?

Donald Landrum: Well, yeah. I thought about it. We tried to take care of our plane, keep it in shape where this wouldn't happen. And being the engineer, course you can't work on the plane in the air. I'd make a note of it and my crew chief and I would fix it if it was something that was noticed that was wrong with it. The engineers always went out early and pre-flighted the plane before the mission. We'd leave interrogation or whatever and go out to the line and get in the plane and pre-flight the plane, have it ready for when the crew got there. We'd get in there and get in line and take off. That was pretty interesting too, you know.

Tell us what's the difference between the engineer and a crew chief.

Donald Landrum: Crew chief is strictly on the ground. We're the same. We're both mechanics but I was a flying mechanic and he was in charge of it on the ground.

He didn't go on the flights?

Donald Landrum: No.

And you did, but when the flights were over, did you also work on the plane?

Donald Landrum: I helped him some, yeah. I didn't have to but I did. I called his attention to, you know, a few things I'd been noticing and he was a very good mechanic. Good man. And then too, when we come back from a mission, we had to line up before we went into interrogation, we'd take a double shot of bourbon whiskey. I don't know if anybody else ever did that or not but all of our gunners did.

Hopefully this was only in combat, not while you're training.

Donald Landrum: They wanted you to relax so they . . . You got a double shot of bourbon.

This was overseas?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir, this was overseas.

So your job basically then was while the plane was in flight, to make sure it was functioning?

Donald Landrum: Right.

And his job was . . .

Donald Landrum: I had a form 41V that stayed with the plane, and every person that got on that plane to fly, I had to have his name, rank and serial number, and put it in that book.

Okay.

Donald Landrum: And when I found something wrong with the plane, the engine, a little oscillation in the engine or supercharger, I'd make a note of it, and if it was very bad, I would ground the plane which call it red line. You must take and draw a red line and that means that plane is not gonna fly. They always have a standby plane with the engines running, and two or three different times we just grabbed our chutes and run and get in another plane. And the crew chief would try to work on ours while it was on the ground. We went on and made the mission anyway. I used to have to fly when the . . . Tuttle was a very good pilot in the outfit. Everybody knew it, and the brass would want to go to Rome on a weekend, the colonel. They never both left the field at the same time. There was a group commander or the commander, one or the other could go but they couldn't go together. And they'd always get Tuttle to fly them over to Rome. It's about a 45-minute flight from where we were based, and everybody that got on the plane I had to have their name, rank and serial number, and we'd go and get clearance for landing and taxi out, and let them out, and never cut the engines, get clearance to take off, come on back to the base. So everybody over there that flew that we hauled to Rome, and I think we even went to Cairo once on a weekend. And they had to have the name, rank and serial number on that form 41V that stayed with the plane. A complete record of the plane is in that form 41V.

I assume that made you feel good that other people wanted Tuttle to fly them around?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it did. He had the reputation of being the . . . I guess because he was supposed to have been a watchmaker in his civilian life so I guess he had brain surgeon nerves, you know what I mean?

He was a watchmaker?

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh.

Wow. From a watchmaker to a bomber pilot. That's quite a switch.

Donald Landrum: Man, he was cool. You know what I mean?

Okay, you completed your training in the United States. When would that have been approximately?

Donald Landrum: We completed it in March of '44.

March of 1944.

Donald Landrum: We left Morrison Field, Florida, to go overseas on the 18th of March, I believe, from Morrison Field. And our first stop was Puerto Rico, and we spent the night there, and the next step was ____ right down through South America. We were flying single.

I'm sorry, where was that that you flew to, the second place?

Donald Landrum: Port ____, South America. And we got in there, 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and it's very hot down there. Very hot. And we waited until 10 o'clock to service the plane so we could get more gasoline in it if it's cool than we could in hot weather. And that plane held 2700 gallons of fuel, and we had about eight hours to fly over water to get to Dakar, North Africa. And

we filled that plane and got on it, and we took off about 10-11 o'clock, and flew at 9000 feet. I had the engines leaned out to 1900 RPMs pulling about 34 inches of manifold pressure, and we just cruising. All the gunners went to sleep but the pilot and myself and the navigator. And we's all busy. And the navigator had his sextant and he was getting a shot over the big star we could see, and I was helping him. And I told him if he put us in the water, he wasn't gonna drown 'cause I's gonna kill him. So he landed this the next morning about 8 o'clock, 9, and he didn't miss it 100 yards, and we had 600 gallons of fuel left when we landed.

Wow, that's an accomplishment.

Donald Landrum: So I hugged his neck, said, "I've got a navigator."

So you had a great pilot and a great navigator.

Donald Landrum: Right.

Okay, now did you say you flew singlely?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, not in formation. We didn't go in groups.

Why do you think that was the case?

Donald Landrum: I think it was to see what the navigator was made out of, I think. I don't really know. But we flew single all the way over there, Dakar to Marakech into . . .

I assume that flight was a lot longer than any other flight that you had made.

Donald Landrum: Yeah. Well, the B-24 would fly further than any bomber at that time.

But actual flight time, you had never made a flight like that.

Donald Landrum: No, I never had flown that long.

And you never flew over water that long.

Donald Landrum: No.

Which means you didn't have any ground positions to reckon with, so your navigator had to be well aware of the stars.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, he did a good job, very good.

I guess. And so you ended up in Dakar?

Donald Landrum: Well, we landed in Dakar, and then spent one day there.

Did you know while you were doing this where you were going in advance or did you know only as . . .

Donald Landrum: Well, we had what they call field orders. We had the envelope there and then Marakech and, of course, the pilot and navigator already had been schooled on where we were

going, and we flew to Marakech and landed south of Tunis. Had an old German airfield, is where we stayed for about a month waiting for our landing strip to be completed in Italy, Venosa, Italy.

By this time the fighting in North Africa had ended. The Germans had . . .

Donald Landrum: Yeah, Rommel was gone and everything. We found a couple old motorcycles in his junk pile and we swung 'em up in the bomb bay of that B-24 and flew 'em over into Italy when we left.

Is that right?

Donald Landrum: We had something to ride up and down that runway. We just flew practice missions in North Africa. Our real missions didn't start until the 10th day of May, 1944. We flew our fist mission.

By this time when you're in Africa, you're getting pretty close to dealing with death and destruction and all the other things that go with being in a bomber . . .

Donald Landrum: We had the gunners rotated to spend the night in the flight deck of the B-24 because the Arabs would come in and take stuff, pick up stuff. And we had to guard our planes. Every night the plane had somebody sleeping in it.

By this time you've had a large number of hours in the air I assume.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, by that time I probably had 200 hours in the air.

Were you becoming comfortable with flying?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, well, I used to in real rough weather get a little nauseated but it didn't bother me 'cause I always had confidence in the crew and the pilot, and I really didn't worry too much about it.

Did you have confidence in the plane?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah, definitely.

Did you think the B-24 was a good plane?

Donald Landrum: I think it was a good plane. They built more of 'em than any other bomber. Had over 18,000 of 'em.

I know. It was the largest production of any plane. Was there anything about it that you found to be problematic or deficient?

Donald Landrum: They claimed it was harder to fly formation. Now I wouldn't know about that 'cause I didn't ever . . . I had stick time but I never had any formation flying, you know. They claimed that the 17 was easier to fly formation with than the 24. I wouldn't know. That's what a lot of pilots said.

Okay, so you flew up to Italy, and that was approximately when?

Donald Landrum: We left about the 3rd or 4th of May.

Third or 4th of May, 1944.

Donald Landrum: Forty-four, and our base was Venosa, Italy.

V-E-N-O-S-A.

Donald Landrum: V as in victory.

And at that time there was still fighting going on in Italy, and there was until the end of the war actually.

Donald Landrum: The front lines were up in Casino at that time.

And how far south of Casino would you have been?

Donald Landrum: We were about a hundred miles south.

About a hundred miles south of where the actual ground fighting was going on.

Donald Landrum: Naples had already been destroyed. It got hit bad during the war.

You came in in May. Was your airfield ever bombed by the Germans?

Donald Landrum: No, we had . . . The British had ack-ack guns stationed around our runway, and they never had fired a shot that I know of. Now they did find one supposedly, a guy that was trying to put on a bomb on the plane but they got rid of him.

So a spy or something?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, a spy.

But you never had any air raids by Germans?

Donald Landrum: No, we didn't.

Okay, so you came in in May. How long was it before you had your first combat mission?

Donald Landrum: We flew the first combat mission on the 10th day of May, 1944.

Tell me what was going through your mind that day.

Donald Landrum: Well, I was kinda scared really. It was supposed to have been a milk run but we got over there and got 12 holes shot in our plane.

Tell me what kind of fear you were having. What were you really afraid of, do you recall?

Donald Landrum: Well, we was over water most of that mission 'cause we fly over the Adriatic over the coast of Yugoslavia, and I didn't much like flying over water 'cause the B-24 don't ditch in the water too good.

You must have really enjoyed the flight from South America to Africa?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. That was great. It was just as smooth as sitting here in this chair. No wind turn, no turbo, nothing.

But it was over water.

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh, about 9000 feet.

What other fears were you facing? Were you afraid of enemy fighters? Flak?

Donald Landrum: Enemy fighters and flak, ack-ack, flak guns.

Afraid of not coming back?

Donald Landrum: As a matter of fact, that's what shot us down was flak. You know when we got shot down, 'course that was 40 missions later.

So your first mission was to where?

Donald Landrum: Some town on . . . I've got a list of those somewhere. I can't find it.

But it was in what country?

Donald Landrum: It was in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslovia.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, German-occupied Yugoslavia.

Okay. Do you recall what the target was?

Donald Landrum: No, I don't right off.

How many planes were in the mission? Do you recall?

Donald Landrum: Well, we had two different waves. We had the first wave and second. We had about 15-18 planes in each one.

Let me ask you, was that flight escorted by fighters?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we had escorts on all of our missions.

Every one of your missions, you had escorts.

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh. We had T38s at first, and then we finally got into T51s.

I had read on the 485th's website that the Tuskegee Airmen had escorted your planes on some flights. Do you recall any of those?

Donald Landrum: Who?

The Tuskegee Airmen? The black airmen?

Donald Landrum: The black ones, yeah.

With the red tails?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we had some of them later.

That was later? But they did escort some of your flights that you were in?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, about one or two we had some of the red tails, sure did. But they would only go about halfway to the target and they'd turn back.

Really?

Donald Landrum: Some of 'em didn't go all the way to the target because they didn't find . . . some of them didn't find any opposition so they just went back. See, the purpose of the 15th Air Force was to destroy Hitler's fuel supply. See, he had tanks and planes and we got to thinking if he didn't have any fuel, he wasn't a threat, and that's what we did. We got credit for shortening the war by destroying ___ and all of the railroad marshalling yards and stuff. And that was the purpose of the 15th Air Force.

So you were doing a lot of bombarding of refineries and transportation places with regard to fuel?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, up in Germany and Austria, they had shops that made parts for planes and all and tanks, we hit those real heavy. Their good targets always had more flak. We had more flak on the stuff that they was protecting.

Do you recall your first experience with flak, and maybe you ought to tell us what flak is.

Donald Landrum: Well, when you're flying through it, you can feel when a shell goes off right under you or over you or around you, it shakes the plane. You get a little shake. And then, of course, it's just shrapnel then when it explodes, and, of course, that shrapnel is what does the damage.

Do you recall your first experience with it?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. It's a . . . Of course, we had little ol' flak suits we put on, and had that steel helmets and all but . . .

I don't think that stopped the fear, did it?

Donald Landrum: No, it didn't. We got hit but we didn't blow up. I don't know why we didn't 'cause that 100 octane fuel was all over the bomb bay and all. I don't know why . . . The good Lord just wasn't ready to take us that day.

One of the things a lot of people don't realize in combat flight was the fact that not only were you carrying explosive bombs but those planes were literally jammed with gasoline.

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. They have self-sealing tanks in the fuel tanks. If a projectile, just a plain bullet goes through it, it seals up and doesn't leak. Of course, if a good-sized piece of flak, that's a different story.

And you have many fuel lines running from tank to tank and throughout the plane.

Donald Landrum: I can see the fuel line that we got. That's why we had to flare the number three engine. I had to be a six-inch midget to gotten there and fix it, you know.

What was the biggest fear that you had while you were flying in combat, or where there just multiple fears that you had?

Donald Landrum: Well, the more missions I got in, the more tense I got. You know what I mean? I could see the end to the tunnel, you know what I mean. With 40 missions, just think, we only got 10 more to go. So that was a relief there in a way. But I think I feared the flak worse, not the fighter planes. See, we could . . .

You could at least shoot at them, right?

Donald Landrum: We could break even with 'em shooting but that flak is, that's bad news.

And a difficult part of it was for you to do your correct bomb run unlike fighter planes and what have you who could do avoiding things. You had to sit straight on the line and just run right through it.

Donald Landrum: Well, the lead ship, we all on countdown with the lead ship. You know, a lot of people don't know it but the one that has the Norden bombsight is actually controls the plane. The bombardier is flying the plane on the initial point, IP we called it. We had a straight flight of 10 miles or so, and the bombardier that controlled are hooked to the bombsight, and he gets exactly where he wants, and on the countdown, 10, 9, 8 and so forth, and get to one, and everybody unloads at the same time.

So they watch him, the lead plane with the drops.

Donald Landrum: The lead plane, uh-huh.

And everybody drops after.

Donald Landrum: We're all on the radio and we can hear the countdown.

So what does the bombardiers in all the other planes do?

Donald Landrum: Well, if they don't have that bombsight, they just get a free ride.

I noted from your website that your unit, the 485th Bomb Group, had four commanders during the Second World War.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it did.

Three of the four, the first three, were, in fact, shot down and captured. So that's an indication of the extent to which damages were suffered and planes went down when three of the four commanders go down. So I assume that every mission, did you have the fear every time that you went up, that this might be the one that you don't come back from?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it's just a funny feeling. It's hard to explain. You think of your home and your family and stuff like that.

Were the crew members, were any of them more fearful than others?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, some of 'em . . . Fatigue got to some of them and they'd have to miss a few missions, go in the hospital. They had kind of like a breakdown, you know.

Did that happen to any of your crew members?

Donald Landrum: No, but some of 'em did.

So tell me, what would a typical bomb load that you would carry include?

Donald Landrum: We could carry ten 500-pound bombs, five on each side. And then you get into the others. We had what they call napalm, that's the one that creates a fire. That stuff just burns anything it hits. They come in clusters.

Did you ever have any bombs that hung up?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. I had to get out on the catwalk with a screwdriver.

Who got out on a catwalk?

Donald Landrum: I did. That was my job.

To get out on a catwalk and pull the bombs loose?

Donald Landrum: We had walk-around bottles for oxygen. We were always above 24,000 feet.

So you had an oxygen tank you had to carry. You had on this heavy . . .

Donald Landrum: I couldn't get through the flight deck with my parachute fastened on both sides. I had to undo one side, and I couldn't do it with my walk-around bottle on on account of the hose that goes through it was in the way. So you get you a big shot of oxygen and you walk out there with that screwdriver, and you'd release the bottom bomb first 'cause if you don't, the top one will fall over to the bottom and probably get on the catwalk. And I could stay out there and do three of 'em, and I'd begin to see spots, running out of oxygen. I'd go back to my station and get pure oxygen for about half a minute, and go out and release the others.

What's the temperature like?

Donald Landrum: I have seen it 70 below.

So you're out on a catwalk, 70 below, no oxygen with a screwdriver trying to pry loose a 500-pound bomb.

Donald Landrum: Now these bombs went out with the fuse still in 'em. You see, when the bombardier releases them, the mechanism is fastened to the bomb and the bomb goes out and it pulls the fuse when it leaves the plane. It's a live bomb when it leaves the plane. But when I release these, I release them with the fuse still in 'em where they weren't dangerous to blow up in the plane.

How often did you have to do this?

Donald Landrum: Well, what caused that is Rutstein, and we got on him real good about it.

Rutstein was the bombardier.

Donald Landrum: The bombardier, they had to get an instructor. I complained about it so much that they got this instructor in the bomber, and come to find out he wasn't turning his bomb sight on, I mean is intervalometer they call it. It has to stay warm, and what he would do . . . He would mess around and wouldn't . . . And the higher you go, the colder it gets. So you fly off and most of the time it was at least 20 below or 40 below, and when he would on countdown, everybody would drop their bombs but us. So we finally got this staff sergeant showed him what he was doing wrong, and he was supposed to turn that thing on once you get airborne, just go ahead and turn it on, and it will maintain heat. And we didn't have any more bombs to get out with a screwdriver after that.

So most of the failures of the bombs to release . . .

Donald Landrum: First two or three missions, we didn't get a bomb out over the target, not one.

Really? None fell?

Donald Landrum: So that's why Mr. Rutstein kinda got on our list. And we told him about it.

So here's this catwalk. Tell me what . . . I remember the bomb bays of a B-24 unlike a B-17. B-17s fold out. The bomb bay of a B-14 is like a corrugated garage door and it comes up.

Donald Landrum: It rolls up.

So you're on this catwalk, and there's nothing between you and 20,000 feet below except the catwalk.

Donald Landrum: Nothing, nothing.

Did that bother you?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it did. It sure did. You bet.

And you were always the one that had to do this.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, always.

Part of the flight engineer . . .

Donald Landrum: Any time the pilot wanted something done, he just get on the intercom and call the engineer, and I was . . . I helped with the gear-up and gear-down. I helped with synchronizing the props and giving them so many degrees of flaps on landing and raising the RPM, you know. When you come in on a base leg, you're using like 2100 RPMs, but when you go to land, get on a base leg and descending, you increase your RPMs to 2400 in case you have to take off again in other words. That's the reason you do that. That's what the engineer did, just things that the pilot wanted done that he couldn't do.

And walk the catwalk.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, the catwalk. That's something.

I just can't, in my own mind, imagine having to do that.

Donald Landrum: Well, I did it, I tell you.

How wide was the catwalk?

Donald Landrum: It was about eight inches wide, something like that.

And it was made of wood?

Donald Landrum: It was ___, it was metal. It had corrugation in it for footage, you know.

Did you ever almost slip?

Donald Landrum: Well, yeah. We had on these big ol' shoes, you know. You couldn't feel hardly too good but I had . . .

And you were freezing at the same time.

Donald Landrum: I had one free hand most of the time, and there was a bulkhead or two I could get a hold of but there was nothing to keep me from slipping and falling really I don't guess.

Did any of the bombs have . . . did you have any great difficulty in getting some of them off?

Donald Landrum: No, you finally learn how to get 'em out, and, like I say, you do the lower ones first, and then they don't get together that way.

So you always knew why they were hung up, and always knew how to get rid of them, and you never had to worry about taking one back with you?

Donald Landrum: And another thing too. When the other guys, when they dropped their bombs, their air speed picks up. You know what I mean? Man, when you unload, why, you going 15 or 20 miles an hour faster. Everybody was but us. We still had our bombs, you know, so we wound up being tail end Charlie.

Which is the scariest place to be because that's who everybody comes after.

Donald Landrum: That's where the fighters get you. Yeah, they pick on the weak side and get you. I don't know. We didn't have but just two or three missions like that. He got that intervalometer on and the bombs would release like it supposed to. We flew over those Alp mountains and all snow, and some of those bombs didn't fall too far because the way we were flying, we probably wasn't 2000 feet above the tops of those mountains.

Wow. Did you ever have any close calls with fighters? German fighters?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, my tail gunner on my crew got credit for shooting two fighters down on one mission.

Is that right? Wow. How about yourself? Did you ever shoot at one?

Donald Landrum: I fired at one. I don't think I ever hit a plane. I really don't but I did fire it. They're pretty smart. They'd come in 600 yards and they felt like they were safe. You know, you have a range and then beyond that is guess. But they wouldn't come in any closer than 600 yards.

I would assume it would be difficult handling that big heavy, 50-caliber machine gun and trying to keep it on that little speck coming at you, when that little speck is shooting at you.

Donald Landrum: Yeah.

So your position was a waist gunner?

Donald Landrum: Waist gunner. In combat I was a waist gunner. The radio operator manned one windows, one side, and I ran the other, and we'd just swing around and pin 'em down in the window stool and you all your ammunition and pull a lever to put one in the barrel and it's ready to go.

I always wonder how you folks kept from shooting down other B-24s when you have all these aircraft coming at you and you're in formation.

Donald Landrum: As far as I know, that never happened that I know of. Now we had two or three planes come down on top of the others that didn't destroy 'em but they did some damage, flying in formation, you know.

You mean where they actually came down where the propellers hit your plane?

Donald Landrum: Well, yeah, that happened two or three times but it didn't cause a fatality, you know what I mean. The planes, they just kinda bumped in the air.

That must have been a little scary.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it was, it is.

What would cause that? I could understand where maybe one releases his bombs and he pops faster and pops off.

Donald Landrum: I don't know. It might be like a chain reaction. One plane does it, and then the other one wants to get out of his way and first thing you know, you got three or four affected by one of them's mistake. So I really don't know.

Did you ever see any of them collide that they didn't get out of?

Donald Landrum: No, but we come down on and the pilot pushed the stick forward and went down, and the radio operator and I, we went airborne. We come back down and we broke a bronze sea marker. They had these deals that if you ditch in the water, you put this powdered bronze and it reflects on the water. It all sticks together and it gives the searching planes something to see, can tell where you're at. That thing broke, and that stuff got in our nostrils and lungs. We had to go to the hospital, broke that sea marker bomb. That only happened one time.

Did you ever see two planes collide and not come out of it?

Donald Landrum: Well, I've seen 'em get hit and blow up, and the first thing you do is start counting their chutes that come out of it. Sometimes you don't see any.

Sometimes we see like a romantic thing of an airplane being shot where it starts to go down and it does kind of like a wing over and what have you. But in actual combat I understand that you could actually see these things explode into pieces at one time.

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. We've had 'em right close to us get hit, and they go down in fire. And sometimes you see chutes come out of 'em. Sometimes if it breaks apart, you usually don't see any chutes come out. But if it just leans to one side and it begins to go down, you see at least three chutes come out.

Who had the best chance usually of getting out?

Donald Landrum: I guess the radio operator and the engineer 'cause we didn't have a turret to get in, and we were free to roam the plane, you know. And we had the waist window and what they call the camera hatch in the bottom of the plane. That's where I bailed out when I left it. But the guys that's in those turrets, especially if your turret is not turned right, you can't get out of it. You know, like the tail and the nose turret, if you're not facing directly either back or forward, you're locked in there, you can't get out.

So if you get hit and it locks, there's no way you can get out?

Donald Landrum: And the spare ball turret was always the most dangerous one 'cause he is let down. The turret is up until we get airborne, then we let him down. And it takes a small guy to get in the spare ball turret 'cause you're in a fetal position when you're in it, and you have the ___ with our sights. You can barely see through 'em, and it's a computing sight. They take you vertical and horizontal whiskers and you frame your object, subject, and fire. And it automatically compensates. But you're down like that and if something happens to the plane, you just go on down with it. You don't get out. You got to turn it a certain way to get out.

I understand also that a lot of people don't understand the effects of centrifugal force when a plane is going down. That you may not even be tied into a turret but because of the centrifugal force is so powerful, you're basically stuck against something and you can't move.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, you're not free to get out.

Right, even if you were otherwise free to move about, the force is so strong that you couldn't get out even if you wanted to. Those thoughts must have been pretty scary to all of you at that time on a daily basis.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, well, I guess you finally kinda get used to it, and, like I say, you start thinking about, "We only lack ten more missions and we'll be through," you know. Get back home, that's what we had on our minds.

There are some that are eternal optimists and they said, "You know, it's never gonna happen to me." There are others who probably said they're never gonna make it through.

Donald Landrum: I think if I was being mostly, we'd go out and get in the plane and it's already been pre-flighted, and we'd sit and we'd wait for the green flare from the tower. Green,

we had to go, and he fires a red one, you'd get out and go back to the tent. Now that was a sweat right there, about 20 or 30 minutes we had. Of course, the weather and stuff, some of missions were aborted before they ever got off the ground. But we would sweat that tower, hoping it'd be red, and, sure enough, here comes the green flare that means go. So that's where green and go comes from.

So you never got in there with the idea of mind of "Let's go."

Donald Landrum: Yeah.

Okay, so you had a number of missions, a couple missions in which your plane was severely damaged.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we did two forced landings.

Two forced landings. Now, what is a forced landing mean?

Donald Landrum: The first one was we had bombed up in southern France. This was just before the southern invasion of France, southern France invasion. We went up in there and knocked out some bridges and bombed different things, and coming back, it was a pretty day, the weather was nice. We done dropped down to about 8000 feet, and we was listening to the radio playing the music, you know. Axis Sally had all of the popular numbers here in the States like Frank Sinatra, Shoo Shoo Baby and stuff like that. We could get in on the command radio. And we was relaxed, waiting to get back to tent city, and all of a sudden, flak just covered us up. It must have been on a boat out in the water, and liked to shot us down. It got one engine out, and we got clearance to land in Corsica which is on down there about 90 miles, and we landed in there and got an engine changed. Stayed there about three days and went on out. And then another mission we had to leave our plane on the island of Vis. That's a very familiar island with anybody that's ever been in the 15th Air Force. It's a little island right off of Yugoslavia, directly across from Bari, Italy, and it's supposed to be occupied by the British we was told. Anyway, we had to come in there. We got an engine shot out, and another engine about to go out so we landed on that island. It was just barely big enough to land a bomber on it 'cause the runway wasn't very long. And we got the brakes on right quick and stopped it in time.

What was the cause of that forced landing?

Donald Landrum: We got hit by flak, knocked the engine out, and another one was pumping oil and about to catch on fire, and we needed to cut it off too so we just went ahead and landed it and we left the plane there. The next day we took a little LCI-type boat over to Bari, Italy, and called the base and got a GI truck come and got us. We left our plane on the island of Vis. We got it back about, well, 21st of August, and we was on our first mission after we had another engine put on and everything was looking good, and we got shot down.

Okay, let's took about engines being lost. You have a four-engine airplane. When do you start getting scared? When the first one goes out or the second one goes out?

Donald Landrum: Well, the first one you can maintain flight. It's hard to gain altitude on three engines but you're fairly safe. You feather that prop and it doesn't become a drag on you at that time. By feathering it, it means turn your prop edgeways.

So there's no wind holding it.

Donald Landrum: That's called a feathered prop. When you lose another engine you can still fly but you're losing altitude. You're gonna have to come down just a matter of descending so many feet every minute.

Is it better to have one on each wing still working or . . .?

Donald Landrum: It would be better, yeah.

If you have two on one side, you can still fly?

Donald Landrum: Ours flew with the number three and four feathered, and we just had one and two running, but I had take-off power and the temperature gauge had done gone out of sight, and we was . . . Of course the pilot was flying cross control and we's losing altitude but it flew about 30 minutes on two engines.

Two engines on the same side?

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh, sure did. And the book says it won't fly like that but ours did. Of course, we were losing altitude, we were going down.

This is when you had to bail out?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, uh-huh.

Now tell me about that mission. Where was it to?

Donald Landrum: Vienna.

Vienna. I understand that Vienna was one of the worst places to fly over.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, and we went over it three times. We had three missions over Vienna, and the third one got us. Oh, yeah, the reason for that, the Russians had . . . Was whipping Germany pretty good at that time, and the Germans were retreating out of Russia. And they were putting their ack-ack guns in the best targets to protect 'em, and that's why it kept getting tougher and tougher to go over Vienna. They had more guns each time you went, and then they'd just get the sky black with flak, and that's what got us.

And so your third mission over Vienna got you?

Donald Landrum: Yes sir, sure did.

Tell us about that. What happened?

Donald Landrum: Well, right away we had to feather number three engine. The bomb bay caught full of 100-octane gasoline sprayed, and why it didn't blow up, I don't know. I got on the intercom and told 'em don't turn any switches on or turn any off.

You said the fuel was . . .

Donald Landrum: Yeah, the fuel line was shot out in the engine number three, and the bomb bay, the wind drafted and blew that 100-octane fumes right up through there. And, of course, that's what explodes, you know.

So you're flying with one engine out, gas fumes . . .

Donald Landrum: One engine out and in about 10 minutes, number four went out. We had to feather it. So that's when the navigator began to try to reach a place, and we was surrounded by mountains. We couldn't get to the water to ditch it and we couldn't land in this terrain over there. It's about like the badlands of New Mexico. And we hobbled along on the two engines, and we was going down, and navigator come on and said, "Let's go." So the pilot said, "Bail out." The pilot and I was the last two to leave the plane. It was going down. It crashed about two or three minutes after we got out of it in the mountains.

Okay, so you were hit over Austria, over Vienna. So you're losing two engines. You got gas fumes coming through the plane, you're turning back, you're over Yugoslavia?

Donald Landrum: Yugoslavia.

That's when the pilot determines that you're not going to make it and you got to get out.

Donald Landrum: Bail out, yeah.

Tell me what you thought about bailing out before you had to experience it. Did you ever have fear of bailing out?

Donald Landrum: Well, we had just dry runs on that, practice missions, on the ground, you know, bailing out. Proper procedures to bailing out, what to do if the wind's blowing and get out of your chute quick as you can, all the good safety deals. But this was the first time. It's a real funny feeling to jump out of that thing and can't hold anything.

I would imagine.

Donald Landrum: We had the little 18 diameter feet, we had the emergency chutes is what we had. The regular paratrooper carries that plus his regular chute, and he only uses the emergency in case his regular chute doesn't open. And you come down much faster in the emergency chute than you do in the regular one. So we came down in those little ol', and that's how I got my injury on my right knee, landed in a rock pile.

Now before you had to bail out on that mission, I'm sure you had thought about whether you would ever have to bail out or not.

Donald Landrum: I always put my chute on just as soon as we took off, and when we . . .

Did you have a fear of ever having to bail out?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, sure did. A couple times it looked like it.

I've heard that some people say, "I'm not bailing out. I'm staying with the plane."

Donald Landrum: Well, now the radio operator was trying to put the spare chute. We had one chute . . . There was 10 of us and we always carried 11 chutes. And he was trying to put this chute on, and I told him, said, "We don't have time." And he give me a little look, and I just kinda pushed him. He already had his chute on anyway but he was trying to put this other one on, so he didn't think kindly of me but he appreciated it later 'cause he was gonna go down with the plane I guess.

So you had to push him out?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, just took my foot and pushed him out. I knew he had his chute on and I knew we had to bail out, and no need in him going on down with the plane so I pushed him out. And he thanked me later on.

So luckily you had to bail out over land which is a lot better than the sea.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, the B-24 doesn't ditch too good 'cause it's got too much belly on it. And that stuff always crumbles and takes on water, and, of course, you lose buoyancy. So we have a 10-man craft. You pull a red handle and it pops the top of the wing open and that CO2 makes it pop out, and it's got a first aid kit, some kind of different things, and if you ditch, that's what you do. You get that 10-man raft out and get in it.

Your crew was fairly lucky because all 10 of you got out, all 10 of you survived, and all 10 chutes opened which wasn't always the case.

Donald Landrum: Well, that's something too that you worry about, "Is the chute gonna open?" That's something to think about too.

So how did you feel when you were floating down?

Donald Landrum: That's the quietest I've ever heard it. You don't hear a thing. It's just smooth. It's a great feeling in a way. Of course, you know it's gonna be rough when you hit the ground, you know.

Was this during the day?

Donald Landrum: This was right about 12:30, 1 o'clock.

Okay, so you were able to see the ground?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. It was a clear day. The sun was out, no clouds to speak of.

Did you know at that time whether you would be over friendly lines or not?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, the navigator had already told us. We was six kilometers from ____ airfield when we bailed out. They had a recon ship up while we was on the ground. We hadn't got rid of our chutes, and we was throwed over five miles. It took us all day to get back together. The Chetnik underground took over and got us out of there, hid us from the Germans.

So you were able to get all 10 of you back together again?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it took about a day to do that.

That's a rarity in and of itself.

Donald Landrum: Yes. Well, these people knew what to do, you know. I mean the Chetniks, they would take care of American airmen, you know, or try to. And they did a fantastic job of keeping us away from the Germans away from us.

I guess you always remember those folks.

Donald Landrum: Oh, you bet, you bet.

So what did you do when you got on the ground, you got together? You were all there.

Donald Landrum: I saw these people and they had on a German uniform with a gun. Of course, we just threw our hands up, "Americana, comrade." And they didn't want us. I saw that Chetnik emblem on his cap, and I said, "Well, we're among friends." So they told us, had one guy could speak a little English and we started and we double-time, we started running. And we ran, I think, the rest of the day. I don't know. I guess must've run 10 miles.

And did you say when you came down, the Germans had a reconnaissance plane looking for you?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, yeah. They were flying over.

So they were looking to pick you up.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, and see, on the way, as I told you the other day, we met up with some fighter pilots and parts of crews that didn't get captured that got picked up with us when we got out of Yugoslavia. There's about 40 of us when we got picked up, different ones, evades that didn't get caught, you know.

You were behind the lines, if you will, for three months?

Donald Landrum: Over two months. I don't know just what day we come out of that thing. We didn't have a paper. We didn't have any kind of calendar or nothing. I really don't know. But it was somewhere around two months.

That's a long time.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we stayed in the mountains, slept on hay, and eat whatever you could find. Food was hard to get. We all had dysentery real bad. It was pretty bad.

Did the Germans ever come close to capturing you?

Donald Landrum: One time they sent an alarm and got us out of this old house down into the woods, and we could see this German, looked like one of our Jeeps. They had their rifles, and they come that close to us. I don't know what the Chetniks told 'em but they went on. And about a week before we got liberated, a group of Germans had deserted Hitler's army, and they had been drafted out of Yugoslavia and they were on their way home. They had deserted. Well, we didn't know if they were telling us the truth or not but the top turret gunner on my crew could speak German real good. And these guys had left and they said, "Man, we don't want you all." Well, we didn't want them either so we had a little pow-wow, you know, and had something

over there to drink. They got a drink over there they call Rakia. It looks like gin, and it'll knock you down pretty good. So we had a toast and talked, and they wished us well and we wished them well, and they went on about their way. But they had deserted the German army, was on their way home. I thought that was . . . And this was all right out in the middle of a cornfield. It was an old building and we was out there in it. And it was something to sit there and talk to German soldiers. And they didn't want us and we didn't want them.

But they were Yugoslavs who had been drafted by . . .

Donald Landrum: Had been drafted, yeah.

So what other type of experiences did you have while you were trying to avoid being captured? Did your crew stay together the whole time?

Donald Landrum: Yeah.

That's amazing.

Donald Landrum: We left one guy. He had dysentery so bad he couldn't go. We had to leave him. We thought he was gonna die.

One of your crew members?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, Leon ____ lives in California. Yeah, I got a picture of me and another gunner holding him up while they took our picture. Every time we heard machine gun fire, well, we got nervous. You know what I mean.

But he eventually was rescued also? He got out?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, we went through a little town dressed as Chetniks. That's the only town we could go through, and it was controlled by Germans. They were patrolling the sidewalks with rifles on their shoulders, and they put those Chetnik helmets on us, and we rode through there in these two-wheel carts. There's about four or five of us in each cart, and the Germans thought we were Czechs, you know, I mean Chetniks. So I thought that was a gutsy thing we did. We could have been captured real easy there but we didn't so that was exciting. Very scary too.

I guess. Now I had mentioned earlier in the interview about your bombardier, Rutstein. Now obviously with that name he was Jewish.

Donald Landrum: Jewish, uh-huh.

We have learned a lot subsequent to the war about many American Jewish flyers who were, in fact, executed where the rest of the crew would not be because they were Jewish. Was that matter known to you at that time?

Donald Landrum: No, but I imagine he felt that way, you know. The Germans, at that time, they had those places where they slaughtered them, you know what I mean. I don't know. We never . . . We used to kid him about, you know, doing the Jewish thing, jokes and stuff like that. He had a splendid personality and he was just a real likable guy really.

But there was no like warning by the higher-ups and what have you relative to hiding anything about any of the crew being Jewish or anything if you were ever shot down because of the fact that they were often summarily executed?

Donald Landrum: No, we were briefed on how to act, say, if we got shot down in German-occupied France or whatever. French put a cigarette in your mouth and straight, and they'd talk and that cigarette flops up and down, they never take it out. So they told us, and, of course, I didn't smoke anyway but they said things like that will give you away if they're watching. So you gotta act like you're a Frenchman, you know, to keep the Germans from knowing the difference. And we were briefed on all that, and about the dogs. If a dog gets after you, just don't run. If you run, he'll kill you. Stuff like that but we never had to use it, you know.

So after about two months of hiding and movement I imagine, were you moved a lot? Did you move long distances?

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. We would walk or run. They claimed that we covered over 200 miles, and we was in Serbia when they picked us up.

And how were you picked up?

Donald Landrum: C-47s, two of 'em flew in, P-51 escort and landed in a cow pasture and picked us up.

Is that right?

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh.

That was pretty daring.

Donald Landrum: The first one came in, he was bouncing. His brakes weren't effective and he ran into the timberline and bent the wing tip straight up. We all got behind him, backed him out of there and got up there and swung on that wing and pulled it back down, turned it around, he taxied back up, we got in it and flew out of there in it.

Is that right? Wow.

Donald Landrum: And we was so grateful to those Chetniks that we all left barefooted with our underwear shorts on. That's all we had.

Is that right?

Donald Landrum: We gave everything we had to them.

Back to them.

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah. They did a fantastic job.

And you said there was a number of other air crews and pilots that were with you at the end.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, fighter pilots that got shot down with small arms ___ and face it like that, and parts of B-24 crews. There was about 40-something of us when we got out.

And you were flown out?

Donald Landrum: Yeah.

Okay, so then you flew back to Venosa?

Donald Landrum: We flew back to Bari, and they put us in the hospital. They run us through the ____ bath first to get the lice off of us and put us in the hospital. We stayed in the hospital about two weeks, and then went on back to the outfit. And we had to go up before the medical review board, and they said, "You boys had enough. We're going to send you to the States." That was good news.

So you never flew again?

Donald Landrum: Never flew again other than when I left the base, we flew into Naples, ____ in Naples.

I understand too though that once an airman bailed out and escaped that they would never let him fly again for fear that if he was captured, he may end up giving the information about the people who helped in the first place.

Donald Landrum: We were always taught to give 'em name, rank and serial number, and that's all. We were briefed on that pretty good.

So they didn't send you back to combat because, just simply because you were shot down and escaped but because they thought you had been through enough because of the . . .

Donald Landrum: That's what the medical doctors said, checked in. And when I got out of the service, got my furlough, went back to reclassification center was in Florida, right there on Miami Beach. They sent me to a convalescent hospital, and I never was reclassified. They said I was nervous, so that's fatigue, you know. People get it and then you the last one to know it, you know what I mean. So they said, "We're going to send you to rest a while." And they did.

So once you were out of the hospital, they decided you weren't going to fly anymore.

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh, yeah.

And when was that?

Donald Landrum: That was in about October, middle of October.

Of '44?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, uh-huh.

So you then what? Did you go back to the United States?

Donald Landrum: No, we stayed in Italy until December. We caught a troop transport out of Naples.

So what were you doing between October and December?

Donald Landrum: Just nothing. We went to R&R. They sent us to Isle of Capri for a week.

Well, that's a nice place to go.

Donald Landrum: Beautiful. I swam in the Blue Grotto.

Did you really?

Donald Landrum: Really. Cost me and my friend 50 lire to get a guy and a boat to row us around. It's around kinda on the northwest side of the rock, and it's got . . . Looks like windows, and you can swim through there and it's real blue in there. And we went and swam in the Blue Grotto.

Wow.

Donald Landrum: That's something to remember I guess.

Absolutely. So in December then, the war's still going on, it's over for you.

Donald Landrum: Yeah.

And you got on a troop ship and came back to the United States?

Donald Landrum: The General Megg was the name of it, troop transport.

What was the name?

Donald Landrum: General Megg, M-E-G-G or something like that.

Okay, and you came back to the United States.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, took us, I think, 18, 19, 20 days. We left on the 9th of December and we got in to Camp Shanks, New York or New Jersey, wherever it is. The Statue of Liberty is where it was. We stayed there about four days, and they shipped us to . . . Well, I come back to Texas. The other guys went . . . They put you on different cars that's going different states, you know. We didn't have planes to fly everywhere. Back in those days, everybody went on train, you know.

So you came back to the United States, and were you given a new duty station?

Donald Landrum: No, I never was classified. I immediately got a 21-day leave, and I went back to Florida and they sent me to Bowman Field, Kentucky, to the convalescent hospital, and I had my wife and baby girl up there with me. And you got out and they let you do whatever you want to do. You know, you can eat like kings. You got pumped up, got your weight back, was feeling good. Anything that you needed, you wanted to talk about, we had fishing sessions every Saturday morning, and if you had something on your chest you wanted to get rid of, you just call him what you think he is, and get it out of your system.

That was a pretty good way to come back from the war.

Donald Landrum: Counseling I guess.

You mentioned wife and child. When did you get married?

Donald Landrum: I married in December of '42. I was married the whole time I was in the service. And my wife was pregnant when I left to go overseas, and my daughter was about a month old when I come home.

Wow. A lot of things happened during that period of time.

Donald Landrum: December the 21st this past year, I had my wife 65 years.

Is that right?

Donald Landrum: We married in December of '42. That's not stylish any more, is it?

No, but it's fantastic. Congratulations.

Donald Landrum: Thank you.

Congratulations, and did you have other children?

Donald Landrum: We have three other ones, yeah. We have two girls and two boys.

Wow, that's the same in my family. That's great.

Donald Landrum: They're all doing fine.

And how many grandchildren do you have?

Donald Landrum: Seven.

So they didn't produce as well as your parents had production? Times change. So when did you actually leave the service?

Donald Landrum: Well, when I went back to . . . When I went to the hospital, stayed in there until the 8th of May, I got on the train. That was V-E Day, and I still got the newspaper I bought. And I get back to Florida for reclassification, and I'd get up . . . We was staying in hotels over there. Every morning they have a bulletin board. That's the first thing you learn in the service, check the bulletin board. And they have my name and special project R. Whatever that's supposed to mean, I never did find out. So I went down to the ____ hotel and told the little corporal in there to ship me out. I had enough of that place, and he said, "Well, how many points to you have?" And I said, "What do you mean, points?" He said, "Well, Eisenhower come out a week or two ago, if you had 85 points, you could get out." I said, "Well, how do you count 'em?" I showed him my service record and I had 120 points.

Wow.

Donald Landrum: I said, "When does that train leave?" And I was on it the next day at noon, and I got to Dodd Field where I was inducted, and in 24 hours of time, I was out, civilian. The 31st of May, 1945, I left San Antonio as a civilian.

Did you have any concerns that one way or another because of the war with Japan still going on that somehow they were going to get you back?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, they offered me when the Korean War started in ’50, they wanted engineers. They wanted mechanics bad. You could sign up and keep your rating. A friend of mine, ’course I was already married and had a little business started, and I didn’t have any need of going back in the service.

But how about when you first got back to the States though, when the Japanese war was still ongoing . . .?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, that was still going on. They didn’t say a thing.

You weren’t concerned that all of a sudden you were going to get that call that said, “We need flight engineers for B-29s flying to Japan”?

Donald Landrum: As far as I know, they didn’t involve me but they did in the Korean War. They invited me to come back in. I’d have to change from the internal combustion engine to jets.

Do you remember where you were when the atom bombs were dropped and when V-J was?

Donald Landrum: I can’t remember exactly. I had started a barber school in about November of ’45.

What school did you start?

Donald Landrum: Barbering.

Barber?

Donald Landrum: Hair cutting.

Did you spend your career as a barber?

Donald Landrum: I did. I was a barber 53 years.

Wow. I have a brother-in-law who’s a barber who’s been a barber for, oh, almost 40-some years. It’s a good occupation.

Donald Landrum: Well, I always enjoyed it. I enjoyed my work. I used to be fascinated when I was a kid to go into a barber shop. I didn’t wanna leave after I got my hair cut. I wanted to stay and watch it.

You learn a lot of good things . . .

Donald Landrum: Everybody seemed to be friendly and . . .

Yeah, you learn a lot of good things and a lot of good gossip in a barber shop.

Donald Landrum: And I always liked to go and hang out before I ever went to barber school.

Did you spend the rest of your time after the war in Texas?

Donald Landrum: Yes.

Whereabouts did you live?

Donald Landrum: In Houston. I married a girl from Houston and I was working in the Houston when I went in. We retired from down there in '98 or '99 and moved to Palestine. We've been here since then.

Well, this has been great. I've really enjoyed talking to you about your experiences. I wish we could talk for many, many more moons about it. I'd like to get into the B-24 inch by inch because I'm fascinated by World War II airplanes. But I'd like to kind of just ask a couple of questions if you will, in summation. The first would be, looking back on that time, how do you think the military service affected your life?

Donald Landrum: Well, it's kinda hard to say. It teaches you a lot of necessary things that follows on through life such as being able to get up and move about and stuff like that. Quit your bitching and do something. That's the main thing I guess I got out of it. I always kinda liked discipline anyway, and it was just kind of a correct way of life the way it looked to me.

I was in the Marine Corps for three years so I'm in total agreement with you on that.

Donald Landrum: Well, you can understand what I'm talking about then.

Yes, absolutely.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, it's a brand new ball game when you go in there though.

Yes, it is. Yes, it is. It's a whole new world.

Donald Landrum: You bet.

How about, do you think much of the war years? Do you have dreams, memories, nightmares?

Donald Landrum: Yes, I do. It bothered me much more earlier but every once in a while now, especially when I go to the reunion. Now this year we have the 485th Bomb Group reunion, would be at Kelly Field in San Antonio.

Wow, so close.

Donald Landrum: So we were planning on going, but when I go and all, and talk to all the good guys, the few of them that's left about the war and flying, they always tell me what experiences what you had, what you did, it bothers me for a week or two when I come back home. I'll dream about the B-24 and being in the service.

What are some of the greatest memories you have from your military time?

Donald Landrum: Of being in the service?

Yes.

Donald Landrum: Well, that's kinda hard to say. I liked it when I started flying. I enjoyed that. Of course, I knew it was dangerous. Some of the old planes we were flying in combat were planes, you know, they weren't in too good shape. I wouldn't get in one of 'em now but you don't know the difference then. It's hard to say. I enjoyed the schools I went to in there and everything, made a lot of good friends.

The camaraderie, especially when you trained and went into combat and shared experiences of being shot down, of escaping with the same group of men, it must have created a closeness to you that you carry with you.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, you feel for 'em, you know what I mean.

Do you ever see any of them anymore?

Donald Landrum: No. You know, there's only . . . All of 'em on my crew, as far as I know, we never did find the copilot, and we never did find the spare ball turret gunner, Cliff Brown. We never did locate him. But all the others including the navigator, bombardier, Rutstein, Gallagher, Tuttle, they're all deceased, passed away.

So there's only a few of you left?

Donald Landrum: Only a few. Now the replacement crews is what's coming to the reunions now. There's probably not out of the 50 flyers, 60 flyers that show up, the original group that I went over with is less than 8 or 10 of them still living.

Is that right?

Donald Landrum: Uh-huh. One of 'em's in Arkansas right now. He's a squadron reporter. We got, every 90 days, a report called the Lightweight Tower. And he gives us a rundown on what's happened and so forth. But the replacement crews are all a little younger than we are, some of 'em are.

So you've had some great memories of your time in the military service . . .

Donald Landrum: Oh, yeah.

How about, are there any things that you would like to forget?

Donald Landrum: Well, I never had thought of it but I guess part of my combat I'd like to forget, flying and close calls you have. You get to thinking about that some night in bed and you got to get up. You know what I mean. I guess something like that would be one I would like to forget more than anything else.

Finally I guess I'd like to say, is there anything else that you would like to add so that future generations will have a fuller understanding of what your generation went through?

Donald Landrum: Well, I'd like to see the young people are not learning anything that's gonna ever help 'em, you know what I mean. All of 'em are overweight. They live with cellphones and computers, and they get away from the best things in life. They just . . . Of course, nothing lasts

forever but I can see problems ahead if they don't get some discipline back and whatever. That's kind of the way I look at it.

So you think the current and future generations can learn a lot from your generation?

Donald Landrum: Well, like a good friend of mine, he said, "You know, Don, you and I have lived in the best years of this country." I never had thought of it like that but it might be, I don't know.

I believe so.

Donald Landrum: We went through the depression, got on our feet, and won the big war. And it makes you think some people just aren't grateful, you know. They don't appreciate anything. I don't know. It's just the way I see it. Of course, I'm 85 years old, maybe that's why I look at like that. I had three other brothers in the service at the same time when I was in. Kid brother was in the Marine Corps, had a brother in the Navy, and one in the infantry, and I was in the air corps.

So you represented all the services in World War II?

Donald Landrum: Four in one family at one time, that's not a bad record. And we all got back.

And you all came back.

Donald Landrum: Yeah.

That's wonderful. That's wonderful, really, really wonderful. Well, Mr. Landrum, I got to tell you it's been a real pleasure and an honor to spend this time with you. I wish it could be a lot more.

Donald Landrum: I've enjoyed it. Of course a lot of the little ol' funny happenings I didn't have time to go into but that happened along with this.

Sure.

Donald Landrum: You know, it's not important really. You know what I mean.

Sure. Yeah, but it is important. It's about the time and the experiences, and I wish we had more time to do this. But, again, I want to tell you it's been an honor and a privilege.

Donald Landrum: Well, I've enjoyed it.

We appreciate your time and the memories that you've given us.

Donald Landrum: I finally got all my medals out.

That's right! You've got some medals. You got the Air Medal.

Donald Landrum: They've been put away so long, my wife like never found 'em.

Is that right? Distinguished Flying Cross.

Donald Landrum: I start out with the Air Medal, let's see, theater. Bronze Star for Italian Campaign, and Good Conduct Medal, Air Medal, First Oakleaf Cluster, Second Oakleaf Cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross and Purple Heart.

And you got the Purple Heart for the knee injury?

Donald Landrum: Yeah, knee injury.

And you got that when you had to bail out?

Donald Landrum: When I hit in the rock pile, when I hit the ground. I busted my knee up pretty good.

Which must have made it pretty tough traveling all that time to get out.

Donald Landrum: I'm 20 percent disabled on account of it. It bothers me but you get used to it.

Well, sir, if there's nothing else you have to add, I think we could say that we've completed the interview.

Donald Landrum: Yeah, I was glad to do it. I never had . . . I've had different friends of mine to tell me I should write this down or whatever but I never did. You know, when I got out of the service like so many more, I didn't even want to look at that uniform I had. You know what I mean. You just . . . I don't know if everybody else is like that or not but I wish now I had looked at it different.

I feel the same way, same way. So, okay, we're winding it up and I'm going to close off the recorder right now but don't get off the phone because there's a couple other things I want to go over you with, okay?

Donald Landrum: Okay.