

TRANSCRIPT – JAMES YOUNG

Interviewee: JAMES YOUNG

Interviewer: KATHY JOHNSON

Interview Date: March 25, 2012

Location: Charleston, South Carolina

Length: 28 minutes

KATHY JOHNSON: Okay, would you like to state your name please?

JAMES YOUNG: My name is Technical Sergeant James Carl Young, tail gunner, Eighth Air Force, 351<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group Heavy, 509<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, stationed in Polebrook, England, from the Sixth, March, Forty-four, to the Second of May, of Forty-Five. My present address is 4907 Ashby Avenue, North Charleston, South Carolina, 29405. My phone number is 843-744-1964.

KJ: Today's date is March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

JY: Today's date is March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

KJ: Okay. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

JY: I was born in Fairfield County, Winnsboro, South Carolina, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1921.

KJ: Where did you go to high school?

JY: I went to high school at Mt. Zion Institute High School, in Winnsboro.

KJ: Where was your first job at?

JY: My first job was a Civilian Conservation camp in Winnsboro, South Carolina.

KJ: Okay. You come from a big family?

JY: There was seven of us in my family.

KJ: Okay. And let me ask you about your enlistment, if I can. When did you enlist?

JY: I forgot the date now. I enlisted on October 23, 1942, into the Reserves.

KJ: Okay. And why did you enlist?

JY: I enlisted because of patriotism and I felt like I needed to do something for the war effort.

KJ: Okay. Now I know before, you told me that you were not called to active duty until almost six months later, in 1943, January 31<sup>st</sup>. Okay. When you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, where were you? Do you remember?

JY: I was getting gas from Claire's ESSO Station on the corner of Reynolds Avenue and Rivers. It was called Navy Yard then.

KJ: Do you remember how you felt?

JY: Well, I felt shocked like everybody else was. Somebody who ran the station came running our and says, "They just bombed Pearl Harbor." And that was a shock to me. We didn't know.

KJ: Was there a draft at the time that you enlisted?

JY: Yes, they'd started to draft sometime in 1940. I didn't want to get drafted, so that's why I volunteered.

KJ: Okay. So, after you joined the Army and were called, do you remember where your first station was?

JY: I was first stationed in Miami Beach, Miami, Florida. And I was stationed there for about six weeks. And we did basic training, ate out of mess kits, marched, drilled, did everything that was associated with the military, military courtesy and all that

good stuff.

KJ: And then after that, did you go to more training, or did you go home?

JY: After that, we went to--let's see, Shepherd Field, Texas, for basic training again, where we went to rifle range, did long marches, bivouacked and all that stuff.

KJ: And did you receive any gun training there?

JY: The main gun training we received was rifle range, firing the M-1 rifle, carbine.

KJ: And the machine gun?

JY: Didn't fire the machine gun there, no.

KJ: Okay. And then after that, did you--were you transferred to--

JY: We transferred to Las Vegas, Nevada to gunnery school. We fired the gun, we went up in an airplane and we fired a target pulled by another airplane. And they had more than one person firing at the target, but each person had a different color of shells, and he could count his hits by whether they were yellow, black, green or what. And that's how we could tell where the score was. So, we did that, and then we went to school to learn all we could about the 50-caliber machine gun, and we learned how to disassemble it, put it back together, and we had to be able to do it blindfolded before we could pass out test.

KJ: When you finished gunnery school, did you know then that you were gonna be a tail gunner, or did you know that before?

JY: No, I didn't know it till after we went to combat crew training.

KJ: How did you feel about your assignment?

JY: I was fine. That was as good as any other place.

KJ: Okay. And then you went to Texas?

JY: Yes, we went to Dalhart, Texas, where we did combat crew training. That's where we all worked together. We flew the plane together. We flew practice missions in the daytime. We did some at night, and so the navigators and pilots could get experience in flying that kind of condition.

KJ: And there were ten of you on your crew, right?

JY: Ten on the crew, that's right.

KJ: And you stayed with the same crew the whole time?

JY: Yes.

KJ: Do you remember every single person?

JY: I didn't stay with the same crew the whole time. Normally, that's what you do, but I was in a group that my pilot got checked out to be the lead pilot in the group, so they needed a reserve copilot to fly in the tail gunning position, so they took me off the tail gun, and I was in a pool, and I didn't get to fly until somebody was sick, or somebody didn't show up, and then they would call me. But anyway, as long as the pilot was a group leader, he had to have an officer in there to help him control the group, the formation or whatever.

KJ: Do you remember your first assignment?

JY: First assignment, well, you mean in the--

KJ: Okay, do you want to talk about your first mission, excuse me.

JY: My first mission was to Rommel, Poland, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, Easter Sunday, 1944. We were bombing a target. I forgot now what the purpose of the target was, but anyway, that's where we went, and that was a long mission. It was eleven hours and twenty

minutes, and we had a full tank of gas, and we got hit by twenty-five FW-190s, and we had twenty-millimeter hit the waist gun position, and happened to hit the armor plate, and it didn't injure anybody. And then the second twenty-millimeter hit the left wing just below the fuel tank. And we missed that one, too. It didn't damage the fuel tank, thank goodness. And after that, we came on back home, and we were lucky that nobody was killed in that mission.

KJ: I remember you saying to me that that was like one of the longest missions that was ever recorded.

JY: That's right. That's what they said at that time.

KJ: At that time, and you were all lucky to survive.

JY: That's right, and we all--the fuel was about gone when we got back.

KJ: And that was your first of how many missions?

JY: First of twenty-eight.

KJ: First of twenty-eight missions. And when you got done with that mission, what were you thinking?

JY: Well, I just remembered what the bombardier says. The bombardier says when he was getting out of the plane, he said, "I'm going to church tomorrow," was what he said. He was a good Catholic.

KJ: Did you go to church?

JY: I didn't do much. I went to the chapel. I went ahead, when we wasn't flying or something.

KJ: When you get back from a mission, what--did you debrief, or--

JY: Yes, when we got back from a mission, we went into--what did they called it

then? They called it interrogation. Now I think they call it debriefing, but what did they ask you, of course, is about how heavy the flight was, and how many fighters did you see, how many did you shoot down, and how many did you see get shot down. And what was the weather like, and all kind of information that would help them plan future missions. So, they would ask you all those questions, then you got a shot of whiskey after that.

KJ: Before the questions or after?

JY: After.

KJ: After the questions.

JY: After the questions.

KJ: And the shot of whiskey was to calm your nerves?

JY: Yeah, for your nerves.

KJ: And then did you get some leave time?

JY: After you flew about--well, once in a while, we'd get like a weekend pass, a three-day pass to go down to London or go somewhere, but when you flew about seven missions, they would send you up to a rest home or somewhere to settle your nerves, and sometimes they would send us to Edinburgh, Scotland. Sometimes they'd send us to Blackpool, England. And the purpose of that was to calm you down, and so you wouldn't go crazy and all that kind of stuff.

KJ: What would you do when you went on leave?

JY: Oh, you just partied around, chased women and drank beer. That's what we did.

KJ: Okay. So, before you went on a mission, was there a procedure that you followed?

JY: Yes. Well, I think I wrote it up. Well, first thing would happen, First Sergeant would come in the barracks and call out the pilot's name and say, "Your crew flies today, and you will have breakfast at two, and briefing at three, and take off at seven," or sometime--timeline like that. And you got moving. You didn't have anybody coming in and shake on you again. You got out of bed and did what you had to do. And after you had your breakfast, then you went to briefing.

That's where they would tell you about what the flight was going to be, what the weather was going to be, what kind of flight you'd expect, and the navigators would get information about the headings and all that kind of stuff. Then you would go to pick up your weapons, your guns, and bring them to the ship and install them basically where they belong, and check them out and make sure they would all function properly. You didn't fire them till you got up over the English Channel somewhere. Then you would test fire your guns. But then after that, you'd wait for the take-off time, and I forgot--and they would either get a flare or something fired from the control tower for start engine, and then have another one to take off and assemble by squadrons, or however you were lined up to fly that day.

KJ: Were there certain things that you always took with you, like I remember you told me before because of the position that you were in, you always wore your jackets.

JY: You had what they call a flight jacket. You always wore that, and you had your parachute where you could snap it on when you needed it. And you took--you wore heated suits for the high altitude flights you went on because you had a heated suit, heated pants, heated jacket, heated shoes because when you get to thirty or forty thousand feet, it's so cold up there, you'd freeze to death. A lot of people got frost bit from just the

coldness of the atmosphere, and not being shot at.

KJ: Did you ever get cold?

JY: I got cold, but I never did get frost bit.

KJ: Right. And then you always had a life preserver?

JY: Yeah, we had a Mae West that we wore all the time, in case you had to ditch and land in the water, you'd be prepared for it. You always--you wouldn't have had time to put it on, so you just wear it all the time.

KJ: You also told me that you had something else that you took with you that had like a cloth map, in case you had to abandon the plane, and some francs.

JY: Oh, yeah, that's the escape kit. We had an escape kit with the cloth map, some French francs, and a photo ID, and that stuff, so that if you landed somewhere and the free French could find you, or you could find them, they could make you a fake passport or something, so you could get out of the country.

KJ: Okay. So, after the plane takes off and you're climbing and you get to about 10,000 feet, you put on your oxygen mask, and then how do you--you just wait until your job--basically, you're protecting the plane, correct?

JY: Mm-hmm. Well, what we would do, once we got to 10,000 feet, the bombardier usually had the job of checking to make sure everybody's oxygen was working proper, so he would call--we'd call an oxygen check, and he'd go around the ship and let everybody chime in at their okay, and to make sure everybody was--they were hooked onto the oxygen system. One mission I went on, the fellow--we came back and the radio operator was dead because his oxygen had come unplugged, and he didn't know it. And of course he--I think they called it anoxia or something. That's lack of



oxygen, he died, so that's why they were real particular about that. And we would head over to Germany where we were going, Germany, France, Belgium, whatever. And whenever we got over to the English Channel, we'd fire--test fire our guns and make sure everything worked all right, and be ready. And then we were ready to go to the target, and our main job was then to look out for fighters and shoot them out of the sky if they came at us, and that kind of stuff.

KJ: Did you know what your targets were, or was that just the--

JY: Once we went to the briefing room, we found out what the target was. We found that out in the briefing room, but we didn't tell anybody. Nobody was supposed know about where we were going. But I think the Germans knew it before we did. That's what they said.

KJ: Because they were always waiting for you, you felt like?

JY: That's right, that's right, they were always waiting. They could find out when we're coming and all that.

KJ: Was that just--did you get a lot of resistance from flack, or did you get from other airplanes?

JY: I was--the most dangerous thing, I always thought was flack, but flack would be coming at you and you could see it, and the sky is full of all these little black puffs out there, and they look innocent, but if one of them hit the plane, it could go through the plane or go through you, too. And of course, the fighters were--I guess they probably took down a lot of planes, too. Of course, they would gang up, and some would come from ahead, and some would come from tail, or lower, whatever they wanted--thought was the best advantage for them.

KJ: Did you have fighter planes that followed you?

JY: We had fighter planes that went so far, as far as their fuel would take them, but they didn't have fuel for all the whole range of our mission because they didn't have enough to do that. But later on, they finally got some extra tanks put on the B-51s and all, then they could go further into Germany, and give us more protection than they had been before.

KJ: So, sometimes you were just on your own.

JY: That's right. Sometimes, they'd say, "Well, little friends are leaving you." Called them little friends.

KJ: Okay. You said before that you flew twenty-eight missions over Poland, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium. Most of them were over Germany. Which one of those missions did you feel was the most dangerous? I'm sure that they were all dangerous.

JY: Well, I felt that the one over--you got that on yet?

KJ: Yes, Sir.

JY: I felt the one over Germany was the most dangerous one because they were after knocking us out of the sky because we were bombing the capital city, and that was-- I guess the Germans figured that was the most important city to them. So, that's why they tried to shoot us all out of the sky. That's why I said we saw ten planes get shot down.

KJ: Is that your mission?

JY: That would be the worst one, I'd say, the most dangerous one, I would say, for me.

KJ: Over Berlin?

JY: Yeah.

KJ: And that was on May 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 1944, you were over Berlin.

JY: Yeah. Of course, for me, it was, but they had like the Schweinfurt mission, and a lot of them down there before. I got over there, it was probably a lot worse than the one I had, but to me, the Berlin mission was the most dangerous to me. And the first mission was, I guess, the most significant one because it was our first mission, and we figured all of them are going to be like that, we wouldn't have much of a chance of surviving.

KJ: But you did.

JY: But we did.

KJ: Right. And when we were talking earlier, we talked about how you felt that that was divine providence.

JY: As much as we went through.

KJ: Right. But you were doing something good in trying to rid the world of something evil.

JY: Mm-hmm.

KJ: So, when the war ended, were you still in the service?

JY: When the war ended--that's the last page on this.

KJ: I'll let you know when we're ready. Go ahead.

JY: I finished my tour in Europe on the Eighth of April, 1945, and left England on the Second of May, 1945. And I was returning home on a troop ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, when the war was over. So, I was transferred to Fort Bragg, where it was determined that I had enough points to get out, and be a civilian again, so I became a

civilian forty-three days after I flew my last mission. This was so suddenly, I didn't have time to get my brain leveled off from one thing to the other, but I made it all right. And I got used to civilian life again. So, I guess that's the way I felt.

KJ: How did you feel? Were you happy?

JY: Yes, I was happy. I was happy I didn't -- I really wasn't planning to get out of the service at that time, but we all knew that we still had to fight the war in Japan, and so that was what I was seeing was going to be the next place we would go, and I didn't want any more of it. I had enough of it.

KJ: Right. But you felt that you had made a significant contribution, and that you had done your duty to your country.

JY: Mm-hmm. So, when I got back, I went back to my old job. Well, I stayed home for about a couple of months, trying to figure out what I was going to do. So, I went back to my old job I left in the navy yard, and I decided I was going to be a machinist, so I took an apprenticeship as an inside machinist. And it was a three-year apprenticeship, so I did that for three years, and then I finally graduated and all that. And one day, one of the supervisors came and said that we need an instructor for the apprentice school. Said, "Would you like it?" I said, "Well, I'll try." And so, then I got a job and I was teaching in the apprentice school for six years, which was a kind of a dead end job, but there wasn't any way to get a promotion out of it. But I finally made supervisor, leading man as they called it in the navy yard, and from there on, I stayed there for forty-two years.

KJ: When did you meet your wife?

JY: Well, in 1946, I went to--a teacher friend of mine invited me to a birthday

party to her house. She lived up here on Fifty-Two. And she invited Lydia and myself up there. She wanted to match us up, was what she was trying to do. So I met her and we hit it off. That was in September, and in November, we got engaged, and in February, we got married. That was quick. It was quick.

KJ: That is quick.

JY: But you know, when you're gone a long time, and you just want to get a normal life again.

KJ: Right. And how long were you married?

JY: Well, I think it was sixty-three years or something -- sixty-three, I believe, when she died.

KJ: And you have six children?

JY: Six children, yeah.

KJ: And how many grandchildren?

JY: Ten grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

KJ: Do you ever think about your guys that you were in the Army with, or do you ever see them?

JY: Oh, yeah, like I say, when we go to our reunion, we got one coming up in June. Every June, we have a reunion. I think I told you this. We're going to Northern Kentucky, or Cincinnati, or something like that. And we always--my pilot and I was the tail gunner, we're the only two that we know that's still living. But that's the only two--we're the only two that we get together with that belonged to our crew.

KJ: Yeah, you said earlier that he was nineteen years old.

JY: Yeah, he was nineteen.

KJ: And you were twenty-one.

JY: Yeah. I was twenty-one. He was going to Harvard, and I didn't go to college, I just got out of high school.

KJ: And you guys have stayed in touch all these years.

JY: Yep, and we've got Christmas cards--we exchange Christmas cards and he always sends a letter, you know, some people write a letter, what they've been doing all year.

KJ: Do you guys talk about what happened on your missions?

JY: When we get a gang of them, you'd say we're fighting the war over again. The president of our club, our organization right now, he's about ninety-three years old, and of course, he won't give it up. He's president and he wants to be there till he dies. That's all right, too.

**End of recording.**

Verified: James Young, 4/2012  
Kathy Johnson, 4/2012