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AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED N. MCCONNELL

FOR THE

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEWED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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MIKE: Today is August 6, 2014, my name is Mike McConnell, and I'm conducting an interview with Fred McConnell for the Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee. Before we begin, thank you agreeing to this interview with the Center. To start things off, could you please state your date of birth and where you were born?

MCCONNELL: Ok, I was born March 7, 1924 in New Castle, Pennsylvania.

MIKE: Tell us a bit about your family, did you have siblings?

MCCONNELL: I come from a family of four total; mother, father, William N. McConnell. My mother's name was Louise. I have one sister who is three years younger. We lived on a group of houses that were built back in 1922, in a part of New Castle which was being built up by working class families, predominately young families. Interesting mixture of religious groups and so on, but all white.

MIKE: What sort of religious groups, Protestant and Catholic?

MCCONNELL: These were a mixture of Protestants and Catholics. Back at that time, that was very serious—people took their faith somewhat more seriously than they do today. Protestants and Catholics, well they tolerated each other, didn't particularly mix together.

MIKE: What was your parents' ethnic background? Do you remember where their parents were from, or where their families came from?

MCCONNELL: Well, my father's family, I'm not all that familiar with, strangely. They were Scotch Irish people who came to western Pennsylvania predominantly as farmers. They inhabited the area right around New Castle. There are any number of McConnells who unfortunately I'm not familiar with. (Laughs). We are all interrelated somehow. But my dad came from, his family, let's see... one, two, three brothers and he had one, two, three sisters. A family of seven total. My grandfather and grandmother died quite young, they were only in their forties. In fact, died just weeks apart of pneumonia. To the best of my knowledge he had run a small bake shop and boarding house in the city of New Castle, close to the mill area. They had clean beds and ate their meals, they [his grandparents] packed their lunches for them to take to work. That seemed to be their livelihood. Because of their death at an early age, my dad grew up very quickly, and he and the next eldest brother, plus an older sister kept the family together. Long story, but quite interesting as to how they managed to do that, but not unusual to happen at that point in time.

MIKE: Right. You said they passed away from pneumonia, not influenza or—this wasn't related to the influenza epidemic after World War I?

MCCONNELL: No, this was—my mother came from a Swiss background. My grandfather on that side, John Kindler and his wife Eliza were both immigrants from Switzerland. My grandfather came from a rather wealthy Swiss family, originally came to the United States on just a pleasure trip, liked what he saw, and decided to come back, permanently. My grandmother came over as a very small child, as part of an immigrant group who just simply came to the States in hopes of a better life. They met here in the United States and got married, and raised their family. His greatest forte was the fact he was in a Youngstown, Ohio area, introduced delivered milk, with horse and wagon. Many interesting stories about how that happened.

MIKE: You mentioned Youngstown, which is in Ohio, in the Mahoning Valley. New Castle, is, would you describe it as being on the eastern edge of the Mahoning Valley?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, right. Youngstown predominates Mahoning Valley, and of course the Mahoning River comes down from Youngstown, meets the Neshannock and Shenango Rivers here in New Castle to form the Beaver River. So, that's the geography.

MIKE: Alright, well, how would you compare New Castle to Youngstown? I always got the impression they were very different towns.

MCCONNELL: Well, they are. Youngstown was a heavy steel industry town. In other words, it was a town of blast furnaces and that type that took ore and coal. Youngstown, geographically, sits on a bed of limestone. That was basic reason the mills started in Youngstown in the first place—the Mahoning River, limestone, it was close to Lake Erie and iron ore being brought down from Minnesota, and coal, which came up from out of the Pittsburgh area. So, that's the combination that built Youngstown. New Castle became known for the tin plate industry, in that steel actually coming from Youngstown was brought to New Castle and further finished and tin coated. New Castle ended up not only with mills making tin sheet, but can works, a box factory to actually put the cans in and so forth. It was more of a finish town rather originator.

MIKE: Right. Youngstown was an industrial town and the products were brought here [New Castle] to finish them?

MCCONNELL: Quite diverse, and still is.

MIKE: In the years immediately after World War I I imagine Youngstown was attracting a lot of European immigrants.

MCCONNELL: Yes, without question. In fact, interestingly enough, the old expression about living on the right side of the tracks—I presently work in a small town which literally had blast furnace and rail road tracks serving the mill. So as a dividing line between the so called “white people” and the other types of people who lived on the other side of the tracks.

MIKE: Just to clarify, we're not specifically talking about African Americans or minorities, but we're talking about other European minorities, say east Europeans or Italians?

MCCONNELL: Predominantly Italians, but there were Slovaks, Russians, Ukrainians, vast varieties of eastern Europeans.

MIKE: Right. I always got the impression that New Castle was the town that the owners of some of these steel mills in Youngstown, they lived in New Castle.

MCCONNELL: No, actually the people who built New Castle were entrepreneurs in their own right. There was at one time a thriving cement industry here, again, based on lime stone. There was a lot of brick making here, and these were smaller entrepreneurs in their own right, they weren't actually a spinoff from Youngstown.

MIKE: Thanks for clarifying that, because I'd always the impression that the management from these Youngstown mills were from New Castle.

MCCONNELL: No, these were a different breed.

MIKE: Your dad worked for Pennsylvania Power?

MCCONNELL: Yep, in 1913 as I recall datewise, he had an opportunity to—well, I'm sorry. I've got to go back to approximately 1911. There were electric street railways in both Youngstown and New Castle at that time. There was in fact a connecting inter-urban between the two localities. At that time, he had some way of opportunity, that he could go to work for street railway company in Youngstown, which was owned by what has become Ohio Edison Company and First Energy. His initial job was sweeping out the street cars and night, cleaning up. He then had the opportunity to go to Loweville, Ohio, which is a small community right on the state line, where Ohio Edison Company was building a new power generating station. He a job there and worked up from I guess kind of a laboring position to a plant operator. He was there until 1937, when he transferred to another division, which became Pennsylvania Power Company. So, at that point, 1937, they built a brand new power station just outside of New Castle. He started that station up, by that point he was a supervisor, stayed there until his retirement.

MIKE: His activities as a supervisor, what was he doing on a daily basis?

MCCONNELL: That's a little hard to describe (Laughs). Actually, in the production of power there's the generation side of it, which is converting coal to steam. That steam in turn is processed through a turbine, which turns a generator, which makes electricity. There's the generation side, once the power has been made its distributed out through a substation and voltage is increased and taken out of there for use wherever. So, his job was to see that during his shift of eight hours that production continued. You can't store electricity so, pay as you go.

MIKE: Right. So, was he on the management side of Penn Power by that time?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, a little bit, middle management.

MIKE: Ok, that's what I was getting at. So, he'd moved into what we'd might term a white collar position?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, he moved up to it. My dad went from probably as far down a scale as you can get, as you say, up to a white collar position.

MIKE: Did he have to do any specialized training? Did he have to take any specialized classes?

MCCONNELL: No, back at that time it was all hands on. My dad's education probably stopped when he was eleven to twelve years old. He never had any formal... but when it came to power generation, he knew it, one hundred percent.

MIKE: A train as you go sort of position.

MCCONNELL: Yeah.

MIKE: I thought he was in management for some time, so I was curious. What was your home life like?

MCCONNELL: Oh, very normal. I grew up during the Great Depression. The Depression started in '29, '30. At that point I was six years old. Actually, because my dad's job was continuous, we were considered well off. There's no doubt that he took very severe pay cuts and so forth, particularly in light that Ohio Edison Company saw fit to operate during the Depression a power station that in Toronto, Ohio, which was newer and bigger, full bore. The need for power at that time of course dropped severely. Mills were shut down and so forth. So Toronto was kept running while Loweville was put into somewhat of a standby position. They didn't abandon it by any means, but there was nothing but a very small skeleton crew that kept it operating. My dad, because of his position prior to the Depression was fortunate to maintain his job. As I say, since we had an income, we were considered better off than most people, albeit that we lived quite frugally. My mother was a good manager, every dime counted, she watched 'em.

MIKE: In your neighborhood, were there other families that worked for Penn Power, or was I pretty diverse in terms of professions?

MCCONNELL: In our immediate neighborhood there were no immediate Ohio Edison and Penn Power employees. The people who lived around us, our next door neighbors, two of them for sure were totally unemployed for a number of years that I can remember. Another one was an independent contractor who managed to hang on. People who lived across the street, [one] was a butcher, he kept employed during the Depression. That was, everybody did what they had to do. At that time I very well remember my mother participating in a local church, in a soup kitchen. The local people that had to go, once or twice a week to get soup to take home to feed their families. Times were tough.

MIKE: Absolutely.

MCCONNELL: As kids we didn't, I can't say we ever suffered. There was no stuff at that time, you made your own entertainment. As a kid, aside from school, come summer time, you were on your own. Mom and dad were busy keeping things together, and you made your own entertainment, which was great, because kids banded together. It was nonstop ball games, there were never enough hours to do the things you wanted to do.

MIKE: Let's go back to the Depression for a moment. From your recollections, how prevalent were these self-help organizations?

MCCONNELL: Oh it was much, much different. There was of course, the government didn't help. I guess that's a little too strong (Laughs). But there wasn't an organized governmental program. First of all, much of your life centered on church, religion was much more prevalent, was a part of your life. As a kid, my sister and I went to Sunday school and church every Sunday. That was routine. You didn't think anything of it, it Sunday so that's what you did. Stores were not open, bars were not open, it was a day of rest. It was respected as that. As kids we still went out and played, but amazingly enough it was on a much subdued basis. Because of the religious aspect that I grew up in, when somebody got in trouble the church took care of you. You didn't run down and get a card and sign up for compensation. It just didn't happen that way, your neighbors helped you.

MIKE: Your mom was involved with helping run a soup kitchen, she helped distributed aid to people.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, as I say, we were...another thing factors into it. The lifestyle at that time was so much different than today. Everybody had a back yard garden. That was just SOP (standard operating procedure), that in the spring time you went out and started your garden and you took great pride in what you raised. What you did raise you shared with your neighbors and friends. Consequently, much of that food was preserved by old fashioned canning. That became the source of a lot of the food that was used in the soup kitchens and so forth.

MIKE: Did you feel a very strong sense of community when you were growing up?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, you knew all the kids. Difference between Protestants and Catholics didn't mean anything to kids. Except there was generally there were more Catholics than there were Protestants. (Laughs). Just a fact of life. We had in our neighborhood the Kelly family, and the Mack family were Catholic, and they flock of kids between them (Laughs). It took a whole bunch of Protestant houses to equal them.

MIKE: So the Kelly family, that was Charlie's mom's...

MCCONNELL: No, no, these were just—the Kelly family was the Kelly family (Laughs). They were, strangely enough, kind of characters in New Castle. Everybody knew the Kellys.

MIKE: What were they known for?

MCCONNELL: Well, their dad was, he liked to have a drink. He was known to get into trouble, and the kids grew up rough and tough. They kind of turned into characters. Actually, they were fine people, there was nothing wrong with them at all, but everybody knew the Kellys.

MIKE: They had a reputation (Laughs). How was school during this period?

MCCONNELL: Well, I went to school, at that time elementary schools were, can't say every block but in a community, we were on what was called the east side. We had school that was called Rose Avenue School, which was probably built in the late '20s. It was relatively new when I started. All the kids in the general area, which would encompass probably...ten blocks? Ten to twelve blocks, north, east, south, and west or its location. All the kids in that area went to that school. You had first through sixth grades, A and B. A being from September to January and then from February to early June was B. You went to one A and you went to one B, got promoted.

MIKE: Did your teachers change?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, each class had a teacher and at Rose Avenue School there were actually twelve classes, one through six and A and B. Each class had probably twenty-five to thirty kids. Everybody walked to school, there was no such thing as bussing. You went to school every day, it didn't make any difference what the weather: if it was Monday through Friday you went to school. The fact that you were fortunate and didn't have some illness of some kind, why you had a gold star at the end of the year for perfect attendance.

MIKE: Did the school, during the Depression, did it organize and childhood activities, such as sports or...?

MCCONNELL: No, school was, I'm trying to think. You used to change classes, but that didn't happen until you got to about third grade. When you changed classes, it was a very minor, maybe, once a day, and you kinda went into a recreation period, at least part of that time. If, weather-wise, it was indoor weather, we had a gymnasium and it was semi-organized, internally. When the weather got good, you went outside and did your own thing. The boys would get a ball game going, the girls would have something going. The teacher kept order but you were on your own. There was extremely little organized sports at that time, at that level.

MIKE: What was your curriculum like? What kind of classes were taught?

MCCONNELL: Reading, writing, arithmetic, very basic stuff. And you progressed along. Literally, you started—they started kindergarten about the time I got there. I didn't personally attend. Shortly after I started, they started the kindergarten. It was literally learning A,B,Cs, learning to read, that was the first thing. You were taught penmanship, that was a very important thing. You were taught English, and as you progressed through this spelling was important, arithmetic was important. You started very basic and progressed through it. It was repetitive, rote

type of learning in large respect, certainly through the first three to four grades. But, you never forgot because you did learn that way.

MIKE: Did you like school?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I liked school (Laughs), I never hated school, there was something new to learn all the time.

MIKE: Was there a trade school for older grades or an apprenticeship program?

MCCONNELL: After elementary school, they had in New Castle what they called junior high school, which was grades seven, eight, and nine. That's correct, seven, eight, and nine. At that level you started to develop into curriculums which were very limited, but nonetheless some small differentiation. At that level, one of those curriculums was toward trade. This ... unfortunately, but a true fact, students who didn't take to reading, writing, and arithmetic as readily as some kids, got shunted off towards trade school. That was just the way things were done at that time.

MIKE: Let's go back to, outside of school you played a lot of sports and hung out with the other kids in your neighborhood. You also mentioned listening to radio programs, what kind of radio shows did you listen to?

MCCONNELL: Oh, at that time, of course the radio was today's TV. As I just heard a guy express it the other day, radio was the theater of the mind. You weren't dealing with anything finite, except words. Those words caused you to in your own mind visualize whatever, and which very frankly is a wonderful thing. It was up to your imagination, it was endless what you could imagine and build in your own mind. It was a great way, actually, to grow up. There was no sittin' and watchin' the picture, twiddlin' your thumbs on a machine.

MIKE: Do you recall Tom Mix or any shows, did you go to the movies as well?

MCCONNELL: Well, yeah, there were theaters and of course live theater. Much more so than today. Not necessarily in New Castle but Youngstown did offer some of that. Movies were as cheap as five cents on Saturdays, for kids. You got to go see Tom Mix and Rin Tin Tin and some of that. But during the Depression there weren't nickels and dimes, so movies were really very few and far between. That was a big occasion, when you went to the movies. Now, bear in mind that there's a time frame, in 1937 things started to look up. More jobs were available. By that time Franklin Roosevelt was president and the governmental programs began. The first of which was the WPA (Works Progress Administration). Money became freer and a different lifestyle began at that point. Of course, by 1937 I was thirteen years old. I was already working because back at that time, when you were old enough to do something of benefit you were expected to do it. If you did it at the right place, at the right time you got paid (Laughs).

MIKE: What was your first job?

MCCONNELL: My first job was with the New Castle Public Library. My mother—we had a branch of the library just down the street from where the school was located. It was well stocked, and my mother was a great believer in books . We were free to go to the library. Of course, you had an old fashioned card. It was great, because, again, there was a whole world. We used it, my sister and I. The world was there, and there were endless books to get into and discover. Again, it was fiction, kids' level, but your imagination did the work. This is, I can't stress that too much, because at my age now, I recognize what it did to me. I still do it, I can imagine things that younger people look at me, and think, "you know, you're nuts." (Laughs). But its now called thinking out of the box.

MIKE: Right, right. Yeah, that also introduced you to a larger outside world...

MCCONNELL: Oh yeah.

MIKE: ...outside of New Castle.

MCCONNELL: When I went to work for the library, I got familiar with the two ladies that ran that branch. I was a frequent visitor, and one of them asked me one day if I'd be interested in washing the walls in the library. There was some open space, and it was pretty dirty because coal was the predominant fuel. I said "heck yeah, I could wash walls." Well, I took on more than I realized and my dad had to bail me out (Laughs). But I did that and that led to them offering me the opportunity to become a Paige. All a Paige did was take the books that had been turned in, and you put them back on the shelf alphabetically where they belonged. I was smart enough to figure that out (Laughs). So, I got the princely sum of eleven cents an hour to work at the library. I suppose, initially I was doing four or five hours a week. That was a lot of money. I literally got a pay check at that time, a paper check (Laughs).

MIKE: At age thirteen.

MCCONNELL: Yep. Well that was... and from there I went, I started to work when I got into junior high school. That's when I actually started to work for the public. The A&P Tea Company at that time was the predominant grocery chain. It had, oh several stores, in New Castle, but just about that time they centralized. I guess it was the beginning of the super market. They went away from where the clerk filled your order, to where you actually picked your own stuff up in a buggy and went to a check out. So I went to work for them, stocking shelves. There was a crew of us who worked. Very well organized situation. We got thirty-five cents an hour, we worked after school. We'd go in and restock shelves, and then on Friday night, was the night, that the store got their delivery for the week, from a warehouse. We'd get from anywhere from one to two trailer loads of merchandise. There was no such thing as conveyors or hand carts. Everything was done by hand and we literally were a Chinese coolie gang. We went out to the tail gate of the truck and the truck driver took a box, whatever was next on the load, and placed it on your shoulder. You took it back to where it needed to be and you put it down in a pile, and then back out to the truck. When the truck was empty, everybody assembled inside and the boss came

around with a box cutter and he started opening boxes. A kid was spotted periodically down through the store at these piles of merchandise. You had a marker, because you had to mark a price on every piece of merchandise in the box. If it was canned goods, twenty-four cans, you marked twenty-four cans, whatever the price was. Then you put it up on the shelf. When you got done, you picked up all the boxes and cartons, and they had to be carried out to the back, disassembled and put in stacks. Then everybody got a broom and you went back and swept the place out. Now, by this time, its four or five o'clock Saturday morning and you were done until noon time. You were expected to be back at noon time because by then—Saturday was shopping day and by then there were customers that you had to help get their merchandise out from the store front to the parking lots etcetera. We got thirty-five cents an hour, believe me, we were rich.

MIKE: Yeah, Depression era...

MCCONNELL: That was good money.

MIKE:... you worked for it (Laughs).

MCCONNELL: Well... and you could work as many hours as you could stand.

MIKE: Going back to your hobbies and what you did in your free time. You later became a pilot during the war, and after the war. When did you first develop your interest in flying?

MCCONNELL: Well, again, going back to books and imagination, I was fascinated with flying, but I can't even say why. I always thought that it would be neat to fly. When I got into junior high school, just in fact, literally when I started going to junior high, I fell in with a fella by the name of Paul Taylor, I think he's deceased now. Paul was two or three years older than I. He'd come from a broken family, lived with his grandmother. He had somehow become associated with the flyer in New Castle. New Castle had an airport and a fella by the name of Finley Wilson was the pilot around New Castle. Finley was an interesting character, he had gone to Slippery Rock, which at that time was a teacher's college, and become a teacher. Somehow, [he] had gotten an airplane, learned to fly it and so on. Paul had become associated with him at New Castle airport, which at that time probably had three or four airplanes. All of a sudden, my wanting to be associated with it became a reality, through Paul. We used to walk out to the airport, and that was Saturday. That was a big day, between trying to work and going out there occasionally. But, I started building model airplanes. Back at that time, it was balsa wood, glue and paper. I was good at it, it was fascinating and as fast as I accumulated money I spent a good deal of it making model airplanes. That, strangely enough, led me to a long time association with Charlie Norris. Charlie came out of the Croton area. I met him in middle school and Charlie had a speech impediment at that time, in fact he had it all his life. But he overcame much of it in his later years. He, kids were cruel and his speech impediment led to what we'd call bullying. I'd been raised that you didn't do things like that. We got acquainted and he liked airplanes and so forth, and became a long term association (Laughs).

MIKE: A lifelong association, yeah.

MCCONNELL: But, in middle school you started to diversify. You didn't realize it, but that's actually what was happening. Because about the time about the time you hit the eighth grade you had to select a foreign language to learn. I picked French, still remember a few words. You, I'm trying to remember... there was, you followed the academic course, which was we call liberal arts. Then there was a commercial, which took you to typing class, and there was a home economic course, which took mainly girls to housekeeping, cooking, that sort of thing. You went to trade school, that was another route. That's kind of the way it was split up at that time. I was in the academic side of it, which was again reading, penmanship, which was very important, and English, this sort thing, that was my curriculum. I worked all during the time. That kind of wrapped up middle school. Now, up to, I'm... let's see, I've gone through nine years, I'm fifteen. So, then you go to, at that time in New Castle the senior high school, of which there was one, located just up above down town on top of East Street. That time, it was a three storied, old fashioned building. Here of course, you split off course wise, again, still further. The academic course split drastically, into true liberal arts, whereas I veered off to what would be today the beginning of engineering, which was stronger in mathematics, physics, this sort of things. I got into mechanical drawing, loved it. That's what I wanted to do. Interestingly enough, because of the fact that there was a senior high school and my age group, population-wise was, more than what the school had room for. We got divided into a two session situation, we had morning and afternoon sessions. Same teachers handled both sessions, but we put in a relatively short day. We went from oh, roughly quarter to eight in the morning till twelve fifteen. Then the afternoon session took up at that time. I had some small right of selection. I always chose morning because that permitted me to go from school to work. I got to work all afternoon. It worked out great as far as I was concerned. It was hell on social life...

MIKE: But you were making money.

MCCONNELL: Well, exactly. I was making money and social life, I didn't miss it.

MIKE: By the time you reached high school, what do recall of world events, such as the rise of Hitler in Germany or the Japanese China?

MCCONNELL: We followed it, not like they do today. As I say, I had split off, and from my own personal perspective, history was over in the liberal arts side, and I didn't have, actually I took what they called at that time Problems of Democracy. Which dealt with civil government and tried to teach you, hopefully, a conscientious voter at some point in your life. But, history per say, wasn't a part of my curriculum. So, but, we followed it. Now, we're progressing through '37 and '38. Interesting enough, my Swiss ancestors came from the German speaking part of Switzerland. In my grandmother's and grandfather's families were decidedly German speaking, both my grandmother and grandfather spoke German. These people were very sympathetic toward Hitler's position. They thought what he was doing was right. That Germany had been

unfairly treated after World War I. Of course, had gone through the Depression in Germany and which caused Hitler's rise and so forth. They were very sympathetic. One of them in fact had a radio set up and I well remember being to his home on one occasion, where he had his radio rigged up. I listened to German radio, and of course he understood what was going on, I didn't, but you know, he'd get very agitated, "Yeah, yeah yeah, this is right! This is the way it should be!" (Laughs).

MIKE: Did he translate any of this, or share this information?

MCCONNELL: Ah... he did in the respect—my dad used to argue with him. My dad was Scotch-Irish and a good democrat. He thought Franklin Roosevelt was the just the right thing and so forth. He didn't hesitate to speak up, and they'd get into some pretty heated discussions, much of which, first of all, I wasn't all that interested in. Secondly much of it I didn't understand and really didn't care. But there was, I in fact often over the years wondered what the hell happened to those people.

MIKE: Did you...

MCCONNELL: I lost track of them completely.

MIKE: ...During the war, you don't know if they changed...

MCCONNELL: I really don't. My grandfather died, let's see, '38, early '39 and that broke up their household. My grandmother went to live with part of the family. Frankly, I just lost track of them. I never, because they lived in Youngstown and Warren, and Niles, just geography alone at that time, and the transportation, you just didn't see these people. Once a year there was a great family reunion. That was it, you wouldn't see them until the next year. But it was, as I say, I often have wondered what happened to them, because at some point in time they were disappointed (Laughs).

MIKE: Right, yeah, very disappointed (Laughs). Which is a good thing.

MCCONNELL: Well, interestingly, in, it had to have been probably 1938 we went on a great vacation, which formed part of my life after that. At that time, every township along Lake Erie had a park facility, which was located on the lake itself. Most of them were in the form of a change house, a bath house, a stretch of beach, and on top of the bath house would be a covered picnic pavilion. You could drive down the lake front from township to township and you'd keep seeing these things. It was free, you could go in, the bath house cost you ten cents or something like that, to change clothes. My mother and dad, we never had so-called vacation. All of a sudden things are looking up and they decided we were going on a vacation. My sister and I were of course teenagers at that point. So, we took off and at that time roads are not what they are today, the trip just from New Castle to Ashtabula, where we went, was a two and a half, three hour drive. That was a big deal at that time. We hit a couple of these bath houses, there's a

whole lake to swim in and so on. This was a unique experience (Laughs). We'd never done this before. It came evening and we went down the road, and at that time there were what they called cottages along the lake front which were available on a daily basis. So, for fifteen bucks we ended up with a two or three bedroom cottage overnight. My mother always had a picnic basket and stuff packed. The next day we hit a couple of smaller places and finally ended up back in New Castle, which was the beginning of a long association with Lake Erie.

MIKE: Right, I remember going up there as a little kid. We used to have a cottage up there.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, that developed—my father's younger brother also used to go up there and in 1939, Labor Day, he was up there. He had a cottage and invited us up the day that the war started, when Hitler' invaded Poland. I very well remember that was great excitement, everybody gathered around the radio and got these reports coming in. Again, to me personally, yeah, it didn't mean that much. So, my interest at that time happened to be a very pretty young lady that was sixteen, that was my interest at that time (Laughs).

MIKE: You said your dad was an admirer of Roosevelt.

MCCONNELL: Yeah.

MIKE: Do you recall that he was a very popular president?

MCCONNELL: Oh yeah, at that time. The period from 1929 to '33, '34, I'm just personally just beginning to personally see some stuff in the world. But, it was a time that come Christmas, we had good Christmases but when it came to gifts and things like that, money wasn't available to spend on things like that. If you had money, it had to go towards the necessary things, people were losing their homes, couldn't buy enough clothes, food etcetera. Again, I was young, didn't, the full meaning of it meant nothing, but certainly I remember thinking back on it, it had to have been a very depressing time for people. Just an example, a Sunday newspaper cost a whole dime. We didn't have a dime for the newspaper, that dime would also buy you a pound of butter. So, you had a choice, and it wasn't the newspaper. So, we went down the street two houses, there were some people that we knew that got the Sunday paper and they were good enough to save the funny papers for us. Monday that was the noon time trip, down to get the funny papers. You know, looking back you understand now what was going on. But, Roosevelt was elected in 1932 the first time, the wonderful NRA (National Recovery Administration) came about. Then the next thing we know the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) was formed and the AFL (American Federation of Labor) was formed. What are these things? People are afraid of them. Other people embraced them very enthusiastically. Again, in retrospect, looking back, I now understand some of the things I saw, but which at that time were meaningless. But, all you heard was "Roosevelt this, Roosevelt that." He was a good man, when he held a fireside chat that was an occasion, everybody gathered around the radio to listen. You didn't realize that it was, very frankly, the start of socialism in the United States. Francis Perkins, who was the lady who started

it all. At that time Francis, you'd see photographs of her with her hat on and so on, and she was a heroine.

MIKE: From '39 to '41 when the U.S. entered the war, after the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, was there any sense, within your family or among your friends or anyone else you knew in your social circle that the United States was approaching war?

MCCONNELL: Well, at that time, again, as far as I was concerned, I was high school aged, there weren't enough hours in the day between school and working and let's face it, the beginnings of a social life. I loved to ice skate and this was a big deal to call a girl and take her ice skating. As I say, I was busy and again, I was having a great time in school. I wasn't the greatest student, I was into mathematics, which I now understand, but at that time was difficult. We had a course called trigonometry, had a wonderful teacher who put things on a practical level, which helped tremendously, and I struggled through it. I guess I have a natural talent for mechanical drawings and all of a sudden I was introduced to how you do this. It was fascinating, I was still model building, more and more sophistication, trying to pursue that. I did get an interest world affairs to some degree because of the war, and because of the German air power as much as anything. That lead to my mother buying me a subscription to the *Christian Science Monitor* which at that time was [like] the New York Times. Fascinating. Here again, reading, you didn't question what was written, but it was news, it was different, you didn't get this in the local newspaper. It was a totally different slant, to me this was fascinating. I didn't realize it but I was starting to formulate a general interest in this. I wasn't smart enough to know what was happening (Laughs).

MIKE: Did you keep up with, did you have any favorite aviators? Like Charles Lindbergh or..?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, to a point. I've got to say I have a respect for what they did, but early on I somehow caught on to that some of this was propaganda. And it was. Yeah, there's a true life story and so on, but the writings at the time were embellished and made these people more than they were. They weren't gods, they put their pants on one leg at a time. I don't know, I think some of that was the fact that I was getting enough association out at the local airport that "this is the real thing here." These things are dangerous, you can get hurt in them. You know, there was more of a reality. So, yeah, I knew about them but they didn't make a great impression, they really didn't.

MIKE: That was a secondary interest rather than your primary interest in flying?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, my hero was Finley Wilson. He's real, he's doing it, I want to be like him.

MIKE: This is also an age where aviators are heroes in a certain sense.

MCCONNELL: I honestly say I never, never got into that aspect of it. I got up in a plane a couple of times at the airport, around the field and back again and you know, this is the reality. I'd like to do more of this. So, I will admit that at that point I'm nearing the end of my high school career and you're starting to think about the future to some degree. Its not like it is today. I never recall anybody ever talking to me about going to secondary school. It expected that when I came out of high school I probably would go to work for Pennsylvania Power Company. That's what happened at that time. If your dad worked in the mill, you went to the mill. You didn't steer your own course. It was the rare person who did that. Yet, I shouldn't say that, because families who had gone to college encouraged their kids to. I wasn't one of those, my dad was working, I was expected to do the same. He is successfully raising a family and what more is there in life than to do that? But I did have aspirations; I knew that I wanted to keep flying. My problem was that it was a costly thing and how to accomplish that, I hadn't figured out. So, I was due to graduate in January of 1942. Strangely enough, Pearl Harbor day of 1941, December 7, Charlie Norris and another good friend Tom Elliot. Tom's dad owned Elliot Steel Company in New Castle. Elliot Steel was what they called a cold rolled mill. They were entrepreneurs, and Tom had money, supposedly. Tom had a car, he never had any money to put gas in it, but he had a car. So, I was working, Charlie had his job, and we put the gas in the car. All of a sudden we got wheels. We did two things, we went to Pittsburgh Pirates ball games, I didn't see very many because I was working but that was the one great adventure. The second, we went Carnegie museum in Pittsburgh. There's a very famous display, which is I'm sure still there, of an Arab camel rider. There's this camel, the Arab on his back and a lion had attacked them. The lion had come down across the camel's side and there's blood and so on. That fascinated Tom. If nothing else, we had to go see the damned stuffed camel (Laughs). On the Sunday that Pearl Harbor was attacked, it was a beautiful day here in western Pennsylvania, warm. Charlie had a date with his wife to be, Mary. Tom and I had gone to the museum. So, we looked at the damned camel, there was of course, it was fascinating, there's floor after floor of stuff to see. Never did see all of it. So, that's where we were. We were on the way back home about four o'clock in the afternoon and that was the first we knew that anything was going on. That led to, of course I was still in school and every morning the first thing I did in the morning was turn the radio on to listen to the disaster forming in the Philippines. We knew a couple of people from New Castle were there. So, a great patriotic fervor. The next thing that happened, in a very short time was the announcement was the requirement to become an Army Air Force pilot, it required that you had to have two years of college to apply, was withdrawn: anybody could apply. So, I said to Charlie, "there's our chance, all we gotta do is go enlist." So we did. This is how short sighted kids are, we, I don't know, on a Saturday we jumped on the train here in New Castle and as I said it cost seventy-five, eighty cents. We jumped on the train, went to Pittsburgh, on Fourth Avenue was what they call the old post office building at that time. That's where you went. There's lines of people. We joined and followed through, filled out paper forms and next thing we know, we're getting physicals and so forth, and "hey, there's nothing to it." We went through that and we were told to come back at a future date, which was a week or two afterwards. We did, Charlie got

rejected on the spot because he was a skinny rail, he didn't weigh enough to pass the physical. Otherwise he was fine, but he couldn't pass it. I was accepted. They said "ok, go home, get prepared, we'll call you, it won't be long." So I came home and told my mother and dad and I was elated. Charlie, he was offered that if he could come back in two weeks and make the weight, he would be accepted. So, we're feeding Charlie bananas and milk, that was the magic formula (Laughs). The first thing I did when I got back was I went to the high school principal, which was Marjorie Rhodes. I'm sure she's deceased but she was quite a gal. She ran the high school with an iron hand. So, I told her that I'd been accepted into the Air Force and I'm leaving. She didn't ask any questions, she said "well, we'll make arrangements that you will get your high school diploma." This is all happening in the space between December 7 and... probably January 15, which was graduation. Sure enough, the word came through, I packed my bag and went. I kissed my mother and dad goodbye, I had a little bag, got on the P&LE train, went into Pittsburgh on a weekday night. Got in there after dark and a joined a group up in the old post office. They start calling off names and pretty soon they call my name, I started out and there was a captain up there. He spotted me, he said "you're McConnell?," "Yeah," "Come with me." "What the hell did I do?" (Laughs). He pulled me aside, he said to me, "How old are you?" I said "I'll be eighteen March 7." He said "I said how old are you?" I said "Seventeen." He said "Son, I can't take you." He said " You're not old enough." Well, he said " Don't worry, we'll put you on the list, you can get sworn in here tonight, but I can't take you, you have to go home and wait until we call you, you've got to be eighteen." So, I thought "Oh shit." Anyhow, I did, I got sworn in that night, got back on the train, the last train out of Pittsburgh that night, coming to New Castle, got on the street car and come up from down town and knocked on the door and mom and dad are in bed and here I am (Laughs). Next day was school day, so you know, better report, so I had to go back. Of course there's no amount of explanation that's going to make you feel better (Laughs). So I went to see Margie Rhodes and she never laughed or anything, she said "How would you like to become a teacher's aid?" I said, "Well, what's this mean?" She said "Why don't you skip your graduation, I'm going to put you in the next class, which graduates in June." She said, "Now in the meantime, starting right now, you've been a good chemistry student, you like Mr. Lengerman," who was the teacher. I said "Yes", "Well, he needs help. He's got too many kids when it comes time for running experiments. He needs somebody to correct papers and so forth." She said, "You can do that for half a day" and she said, "How'd you like to take your drawing class the rest of the day?" "Shew," this is utopia! So everything turned out great and I started doing that, expecting that after March 7 I'd get called up. Well, March 7 came and April 7, and I'm getting towards graduation and still didn't get called. But, it was a good experience. I got to see teaching a little bit from the teacher's side. I had a great time because my social life suddenly expanded. There were some nice looking girls in the chemistry class and I had plenty of time to operate. Then I got to, in my drawing class, I'm trying to think of the...his name was Wallace, Bill Wallace, was the teacher's name. He pushed me into stuff that I would've never gotten otherwise. I learned in a matter of a few weeks all kinds of stuff. I started drawing framework for houses and stuff that you just didn't get in an ordinary class. Its great. I came up

to graduation, I did graduate, I knew the kids in the next class, but you didn't have a close association with them. Incidentally, that was Charlie's class, he had fallen behind. So I did have that. I had another good friend in there who I had known from physics class. We got through that and suddenly school's out. So my dad said to me "Look, you can't sit around here doing nothing." I said "Well, I'm working for A&P." He said, "That ain't work". The hell it ain't. (Laughs). Anyhow, the upshot of it was that a company called Shaw Perkins in West Pittsburgh, just down by the power plant, was looking for help. I went down, applied, was instantly hired because they had a war contract of some kind and I suddenly learned the heating radiator business. I met another kid down there my own age, by the name of Tom Cody from Wampum, Pennsylvania. He and I were bosom buddies and he also, not waiting for the Air Force, but he had signed on, same problem; wasn't old enough. So,

TAPE ENDS

TAPE RESTARTS

MIKE: Sorry, we ran out of battery, so we're picking up here, when you were working for the radiator company down in west Pittsburgh...

MCCONNELL: Ok

MIKE: ...Tom Cody.

MCCONNELL: Ok, well, it ended up that I never got called until late December, just after Christmas, of 1942, it would be. So I worked for a period of roughly six months for Shaw Perkins. During that time I learned the radiator business pretty thoroughly, I knew what was going on in the plant. I was busy during that time... I did associate with a couple of girls. Did finally start to see a movie now and then with a girlfriend. It was a good time, because my mother needed some help around the house and I was available to do that. Again, I was putting money in the bank, which incidentally leads up to something else (Laughs). So, finally I did get the call sometime just before Christmas and knew I had to go. In fact, just before the first of the year, it was the last week of December that I finally left. Again, the experience of getting on the train and going to Pittsburgh and everybody was in the group, which it seemed like hundreds of people. We marched down to the old Pennsylvania station in Pittsburgh and got on the train. Went from there, the hard way, to Miami, Florida. At that time the Air Force, or the Army Air Force, because that's what it was at that time, it was not the Air Force of today. It had taken over the old hotels in Miami Beach and they had, won't say gutted them, but they had taken out all the furnishings and a room might have two, double decker beds, four guys in a room. You went down the street to another hotel which had dining facilities and that's where you ate, that was the mess hall. You started army life, stupid stuff such as learning to march together, how to wear a uniform, and how to make a bed, how to keep the place clean. You learned that you took your turn doing KP (kitchen patrol). Part of this was to take a battery of what I'm sure were intended to be psychological testing and aptitude testing. We'd all go to the theater and this was had been

a huge downtown theater in Miami Beach, that's where you assembled to take these tests. Out of that you got segregated into categories. As far as we were concerned, everybody there was a pilot. That's what everybody's aspiration was. Well, after, I guesstimate, as my recollection four weeks, no more than that, all of a sudden you are segregated. There's pilots, there's navigators, there's bombardiers, there's gunners, there's engine people. This is—how they arrived at this, only God knows. But that's how it was done. Amazingly enough it worked. I was segregated as a pilot and was designated as the first group to go to the University of Cincinnati, which was formulating what became a widespread college participation in teaching and so forth. Time went fast, as far as learning anything at the University of Cincinnati, I didn't learn anything, it was chaos. They weren't organized, nor were we. Again, aside from close order marching and playing an awful lot of football, this sort of thing, that's how the time was spent. We did attend some classes, they were I'm sure freshman level. Mathematics, as I recall, not much more, and it was way over my head, I didn't know what they were talking about, you killed the time and went about your business. My mother and dad came down, of course there was rationing and so forth, but they came down to see me while I was there, because this was right around the time of my birthday. I saw them for a few hours, the next thing, I got shipped out of there to San Antonio, Texas, to pre-flight. This was the old pre flight school system, which had operated before the war, was a shambles. It had been totally overwhelmed with people. What we got was just a gesture towards the start to become an officer and a gentleman. We lived what we called tar paper shacks, they were quickly built, just that. They were frame buildings covered in tar paper, mess hall and so forth. But, we started to get the basics of radio, map reading, again you got just endless crap (Laughs). Both part of it was psychological, part of it was physical. You got up early in the morning, you ran in groups, you went through drills, you did stuff that you did no idea why, but now you can look back and say "Ok, they're finding out how tough you were."

MIKE: Right. When were you assigned your rank?

MCCONNELL: You had no rank, your rank was cadet, you were an air cadet. You had a uniform but it was, you know, cadet. Pre-flight got tougher and tougher. They got serious about radio, they got serious about map reading. You'd better damn well toe the line when it came to discipline, this sort of stuff. It was the beginning, and for a bunch of kids in off the street, it was tough. You were a very mixed group. I was a kid, just past eighteen or nineteen at that point. I had minimal school and you're suddenly up against guys who are twenty-six, have a college education. The group was that mixed, and everywhere in between, every ethnicity that you can imagine, and you had to get along with these guys, they're your buddies.

MIKE: What were your first impressions of Texas? Because again, this is way off the beaten path. You'd only gone on one vacation before you joined the Air Force.

MCCONNELL: Right, well, Texas was interesting (Laughs). Because we weren't the old pre flight school, we were not on it obviously, we were out in the boon docks. It was just heat, stones, dry, and generally miserable. But again, this was all part of the process. Frankly, in

retrospect you're glad you went through it. You didn't want to do it again, but by God I survived, that was the attitude.

MIKE: This was by 1943, correct?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, this is '43, early '43.

MIKE: So you had roughly a year, year and a half of, since the war had started.

MCCONNELL: Yeah.

MIKE: What do you recall about mobilization, for the civilian population, such as collection drives, propaganda?

MCCONNELL: Strangely enough, there was little of that, at that point. Again, you were aware of what was happening in the war, but not in any depth. There was not a great deal of propaganda, "Why do we fight." That came much later. At that stage it was just all, you're just trying to reach this goal of being a pilot. There was not too much of the war itself, why you were there wasn't important.

MIKE: Did you have any other family members that were in the service?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I had just one close person, and that was my dad's youngest brother, who had in fact been just been born, he was just a few months old when his mother died. So, he was in fact, he and I had been, I can't say buddies, but we did hunt together and do things together. He was in the Navy and he and I exchanged a few letters. You really didn't even have time during pre-flight in particular to write. Even communication with your family was difficult.

MIKE: What was your parent's reaction to your enlistment, when you first joined in December 1941?

MCCONNELL: Oh, I can't say. To be honest with you, I'm sure they had deep feelings about it, but it wasn't expressed particularly. Everybody was confronted with the same thing, everybody had to support the war. If this is what you had to do, you had to do it. It was excepted, there was not emotion, much different from what we're seeing today. It was a common enemy, that's what we gotta do and we're going to do it. There wasn't any debate about whether we should do it, or how we're doing it. Mr. Roosevelt's in charge and you do it. Again, remember, you didn't have communication like you've got today.

MIKE: That's a good point. Your dad wasn't in World War I, he didn't have any family members who fought?

MCCONNELL: No, he had never served.

MIKE: So there wasn't a long history of military service, this is really a new thing for the family as well.

MCCONNELL: No, I was, in fact myself and my uncle Meldon, we were the first two out of the family.

MIKE: He was in the Navy?

MCCONNELL: He was in the Navy. He was older, he was part of the boys that, if you remember back there was the selective service started. He was one of the "I'll be back in a year" guys, who didn't make it back in a year. He was just in that age group. He elected to go to the Navy when he went, that's where he was. Of course while he was serving the war broke out and he was stuck at that point.

MIKE: Which theater was he in, was he in the Atlantic or the Pacific?

MCCONNELL: He worked the Atlantic theater, back in the U-boat war days, the very early part, when the Germans were raising hell in the Atlantic, sinking tankers. He had an interesting experience there, and then, you almost say a second go around. He got a rather extensive leave and went out with a new ship, and that happened to be an ammunition boat. That's, unfortunately how it ended. Because that boat was in the Pacific and she blew.

MIKE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

MCCONNELL: Oh yeah, I've got pictures and all kinds of that. Hopefully someday I'll get it put together.

MIKE: We should definitely remember him. Getting back to Texas, when you're doing your pre-flight training, you're learning how to read maps, how to use radios.

MCCONNELL: Well, from pre flight school you got assigned to your first phase of flight training. I was fortunate; I got assigned to Parks Air College, in East St. Louis. Parks was an old aeronautical school, its still going. That's where we ended, my group. We were a class. At that point we were 44 C, which was March, '44. That was our goal. So we started training. Interesting, because Parks was a strange mixture of military and civilian. Our instructors were civilians, we were living in nice dormitory type facilities in part of the college. It was a hell of a difference from pre-flight (Laughs). We started flying PT 19s, nice little airplane, two seater, instructor in back, you're up front. He could communicate with you, you didn't communicate back, you acted. My recollection of the actual training was nothing but good. I had a wonderful instructor, he was tough but he was fair. We had fun in the respect that if I did good, we'd take off for five minutes and he played. I got to do loops and aerobatics that we weren't supposed to be doing. He was that kind of guy, you got rewarded when you did good. You had check flights with Army people periodically, which you were scared to death of, because you could wash out at that point, and nobody wanted to wash out. After about, roughly eight hours of dual instruction

came the wonderful day when we were out at what we called an auxiliary field. We had a main field and then they had just acreage over in Illinois. These were just literally grass fields. The instructors among themselves would decide that two or three of them would take their students out there, just to keep the traffic from getting congested. So we were at an auxiliary field and I had made two or three touch and go landings. The instructor told me keep the engine running but to pull over to the side and stop. I did and all of a sudden I was conscious that he was getting out. He did and patted me on the back and said "Go." (Laughs). So all of a sudden, man this is happening and I'm by myself.

MIKE: So this was your first solo flight.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, so I took off and came around and made a decent landing. He waved to me, "Go again." So, I made oh, maybe four or five landings and he waved for me to come over and picked him up. He said, "Take us home," I said "Ok: so I did. So that was the beginning and after that I did more and more solo time, just practice. We'd go out and he'd show you, take you through a certain exercise. I'd take him back, drop him off and I'd go and eventually come back and pick him up. That's the way you learned. I passed my check flights, I started to build some confidence and, let me think... we were doing thirteen weeks, was the way it worked out. Yeah. I was there thirteen weeks and by the time I left I was a fairly confident pilot, I'd built up some hours. We lost a percentage of the kids there. Some kids just couldn't do it, that's all there was to it. They didn't have the aptitude or they got totally frightened and so that was through Parks. Now the move is to, were coming up time wise, I was there I did get into St. Louis a couple of times. I saw Greer Garson, who was a very fabulous red headed actress. She was at the Chase Hotel, which at that time was quite the place. In a crowd of people, I got a glimpse of her famous red hair. But you didn't have that much free time and what free time you did get you spent trying to communicate with your family. All of a sudden girls become very, very—you needed girls to communicate with and you started writing letters to girls that you knew in high school that probably couldn't give a damn about you (Laughs). Anyway, we finished there and the next step was basic training. We went to Winfield, Kansas, which was nothing more than a concrete runway laid down in a wheat field, surrounded by tar paper shacks. Its now September, going into October and its getting cold in Kansas. This was not a pleasant place. Plus, we got introduced to the famous BT 13, which is a miserable little airplane. It had a 400 horsepower radial engine, enough power to do damage. We are now with Army instructors. This is wash out time. Very deliberate, planned process. This is tough. Now you're a pilot, now were' going to start to teach you about what this is all about and you're going to do it our way, you're going to do it fast and you'd better do it right. We suffered our first casualties; the BT 13 would kill you if you let it. You learned what this was all about. So, I took to it, in fact (raises hand) that finger's got a crook in it. I broke it playing football and never told anybody, I set it. Because I wasn't gonna drop out. You did stupid stuff like that (Laughs).

MIKE: So how much of this just sheer determination to become a pilot for you? What was your personal motivation?

MCCONNELL: That is your motivation; I'm going to do this. I put this much into this. You didn't think about it in terms exactly. But you either had that determination or you didn't. A lot of kids just, some morning would get up, would roll their bunk up and walk away. They'd had it, they couldn't. There was tremendous mental pressure on you. It was done very deliberately, You could almost say it was cruelty, but it had its purpose. You've got to be mentally tough. This was their way of doing it. You're busy all the time because you're taking ground school when you're not flying. But you are flying and you're flying lots. We started night flying. I've landed an airplane in absolute darkness. No lights. But you learned it and it was necessary that you learned it. It sounds stupid, but it had its purpose. It came in handy later on. But they would literally put a light down at the end of the runway. That's it. It told you that's the end of the runway. Now whether the runway was here, here or here (Gestures) that was up to you to figure out because the light is still there. You can go 360 degrees around that. But you had to read your compass, you had to know what you were doing.

MIKE: Which is where ground school came in. This is the combination of skills that you're building in ground school.

MCCONNELL: You're still taking radio. That was of course the communicator and it was also your navigator. At that time navigation was done with radio towers, making a pathway, if you will. The sound coming off of there, that's what you're going by. You're listening to dit dots, one of them is this side, one of them is this side (Gestures). You're balancing this, to get down to that point. Then you go over what they call a cone of silence. Then you start out another leg, and again, you're balancing both sides of this, so you're going out there. You're learning this. Actually, in basic training, BT 13s, we didn't fly that. We're learning this on the ground, you're simulating it. If anything it is frustrating when you're on the ground, because somebody is moving that path, you're not doing the moving, they're moving the path. That can get confusing as hell. More guys failed that part of the thing, but again, it all had its purpose.

MIKE: Right.

MCCONNELL: Of course it turned to winter out there, snowed. Oh man, it snows in Kansas (Laughs). So finally we're wrapping up just about holiday time. We'd been aware the two towns close by were Winfield, which was in Kansas, and I'm trying to think of the....some god forsaken cow town in Arkansas. We were kinda real close to the border. I got to Winfield a couple of times and down to Arkansas. That's where I started drinking whiskey (Laughs). You could buy booze, moon shine, and that's what we started drinking out there. It was dry otherwise. I can't say that I over did it out there, but coming from family where I had not been exposed to booze, this was a whole new experience (Laughs).

MIKE: Did you ever encounter, this was December '43.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, this was December '43.

MIKE: When you were out west, did you ever encounter German prisoners of war? That were working?

MCCONNELL: No, no. They weren't anywhere around us, they were back here, more in the eastern industrial area, not out in the farms.

MIKE: Ok, I didn't know if there were any, say in Texas.

MCCONNELL: No.

MIKE: I was just curious if you'd had any interaction with the enemy.

MCCONNELL: No.

MIKE: As you're receiving instruction, did you ever encounter instructors who had combat experience? Did you ever hear stories of missions?

MCCONNELL: No. Most of our instructors were, how do I want to express it? Very frankly, psycho cases (Laughs). They were guys who had gone through the process and who were declared unfit for combat. They could fly, but they decided "But we don't want these guys over there, they're dangerous."

MIKE: But they're alright as instructors.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, and they are, to themselves, they're not aware that's the way they've been categorized. All they know is frustration, because they want to go to combat and they're not getting there. So they take their frustration out on their students. They were miserable.

MIKE: You never met anybody who had combat experience or had come back from theater?

MCCONNELL: Oh yeah, later on. But not at that level.

MIKE: Ok, did you ever hear stores about say, the Bloody 100 Raid on Schweinfurt, any of those first 8th Air Force raids that really went pretty badly wrong.

MCCONNELL: Oh yeah, again, later on.

MIKE: Not when you were in training. So it was almost a situation of a media blackout, in a certain sense.

MCCONNELL: Most of that stuff, in fact, we were too busy to actually to get into that. It wasn't until we got much closer that we got into contact with that kind of stuff. We're green (Laughs). But anyway, I did get to Wichita which is full of girls. This is where Boeing had their big plant, building B-17s. We got off the train in Wichita on, this was the day before Christmas. No, two days before. There were girls waiting and all you had to do was "Ok, you." (Laughs). I ended up with a wonderful girl whose husband was in combat. She had to have been ten years

older than I was. She took me home to her family, where she was living, they put me up for two days. I couldn't have been treated any nicer. It was a great experience. I tell people I spent Christmas with a married woman (Laughs). And it was true. Again, I had an experience there, of buying moon shine. She liked to drink, and by that time I was. So we drove out of town, out of Wichita, she had a car. We went out and she said "Do you have money?" So we drove on a side road to a farm, and here's a barn and silo. We drove up alongside the silo and a guy opened the window and I gave him twenty bucks and he passed over a pint of moonshine (Laughs). I'm telling you, I've got stories like that. So, anyhow, very shortly after Christmas, literally the first week of January, we all got on the train again. They never tell you where you're heading and you find out from the railroad people where you're going. So all the guy said was that we were headed to Waco, Texas. We got into famous Texas ice storm. That didn't bother us too much on the train, but it was an experience just to see it. We got to Lackland Air Force base in Waco. Again, a whole change of atmosphere. We had to make a selection as to whether we wanted to become a fighter pilot or a bomber pilot. I thought awhile about this and, while I enjoyed aerobatics, and I was very proficient at it, it just didn't appeal to me that much. So, I decided that I'd go to Lackland. So we were flying AT-17s, which is a twin engine piece of junk with wooden props and a retractable gear, had flaps, has all the equipment to give you experience. Atmosphere changed, because at this point the Air Force has decided that we've got an investment in you. Instead of trying to get rid of you, we've got to protect you and get you the rest of the way through. You get treated respectably, you still are disciplined, you still have got a very tough flying schedule, you can still wash out. By this time incidentally, we have probably lost, forty to forty-five percent of the original group. So we start, we again had civilians instructors, not Army instructors. Good guys, treated you as human beings and were there to teach. You start flying instruments, real honest to God instruments. Now you fly down the air way. I struggled with that to start with, until I got a good instructor who happened to be an Army pilot. He recognized me for what my problems were and showed me how to get over them. All of a sudden, instruments became fun. Once they became fun, you get confident and you do well. I learned that and you start flying cross country, the instructor is not with you, ninety percent of the time you're flying with a buddy whose is just as green and dumb as you are. We started flying all over the state of Texas, cross country, this was fun flying. I did well, I loved it and this is why I came here (Laughs).

MIKE: Right.

MCCONNELL: That time went by fast, we were allowed off base much more frequently, got to socialize to some degree with the local people. Met, down there, a young lady who eventually I spent a good deal of time with and wrote to her when I was overseas (Laughs). But, it was a whole different atmosphere, and the first thing you know its March and its time to graduate. In the meantime, there was a B-26 who had some engine problems, landed at Lackland one night, an emergency. I got to look it over, as we all did. Everybody climbed all over the thing, and I decided I wanted to fly this thing. Of course, there were stories about the B-26; this is the widow

maker and a hot airplane, doesn't have enough wing span, and all this crap. I figured "Hey, you know, this sucker got here, it's rugged as hell." I just fell in love with it and I decided it was my airplane.

MIKE: Yeah, the B-26 was a notoriously dangerous plane to fly.

MCCONNELL: Well, we hadn't got that far yet, this was before we got there. So, that happened. We came to graduation day and got our wings and our commission and a two week leave. So, long train trip from Waco, Texas to New Castle. But, trains were crowded, wow. I got home and mother had saved up ration coupons (Laughs). I was home about a good week and all of a sudden it was time to go home. Home wasn't home, I had to go back. So, I ended up, I had a buddy who lived in Chicago. I'm not just quite sure how we got together, but he said "Chicago's on the way back to Texas, come on out." (Laughs) So I did, I left two or three days before I had to get back. I went to Chicago and met him. We had fun, went to the horse races. A girl from Greenville, who had taken care of my dad in the hospital, my mother had a picture of me in uniform up at the hospital. So, I ended up with her address, turned out she was at Cook County hospital in nurses' training. That was part of the incentive to visit Chicago (Laughs). Met her, and we had a couple of days fun, got on the train and went back to Del Rio, Texas. Del Rio is B-26 school. They had come around and said "Where do you want to go?" B-17s, B-24s, that was the big selection. I wanted to go B-26 school, "Oh shit, you don't want to go there, those are widow makers." "No, I want to go to B-26 school."

MIKE: What was so special? The aesthetics of the plane or the challenge of it?

MCCONNELL: That was part of it. Very honestly, that was part of it. The idea that this thing is tough to fly. I want the best, I'm going after the best. That had a lot to do with it. I truly accepted that. Ok, if I'm going to get killed, I'm going to get killed, but you know, I'll go in glory. (Laughs) There were two of us out of the whole 44 C that went to B-26 school. So, I was a strange person. (Laughs) I got down to Del Rio, which is of course on the Texas-Mexican border, it's a cow town pure and simple. Southern Pacific runs a train a day through there, at that time. You could get across the border into Mexico. Had a lot of fun. You're now an officer, you're now respected as one. You take salutes from enlisted men and now you're responsible.

MIKE: What was your rank?

MCCONNELL: Second lieutenant. Gold bar lieutenant. We start flying B-26s, Army instructors. Now you start to run into ex-combat guys. Not very many, but a few. Didn't talk about it very much. Very little in fact. In retrospect, had they told us more than they did it would've been helpful, but they didn't. I took to the B-26 like a duck takes to water, seriously. I loved the airplane, I just, I don't know, it just was my plane. Again, you start off with dual instruction. I had about two hours, literally, and my instructor said, "You're on your own. I can't help you." About ten days into training I was flying up with another student. He was flying co-pilot, we had a sergeant engineer who was with us purely because he got an extra twenty-five bucks a month

and was suicidal (Laughs). So, we got up and we had the experience of not getting our landing gear down. I bellied the airplane in the end, against orders. Long story. It was an experience, but again, a good experience, a learning experience. "I ain't afraid of this airplane, I can fly this airplane." I had a good time down at Del Rio, we could go off base any time we wished. All of a sudden, you don't want to go (Laughs). Went over to Mexico a couple of times, watched a bull fight and drank Mexican beer, but there was nothing to do down there. Biggest excitement the girl I met in Waco, I met her in San Antonio. She came part way and I came part way and we met and spent a couple of days up there (Laughs). It was strictly work, we were given stuff to accomplish and it we had check flights to make sure that we did accomplish it. It was purely working. We were on rigid schedules, again a short time, thirteen weeks. I did go from Del Rio to Oakland, California. We were permitted one long flight while we were there. Two students and an instructor. Naturally we went where the instructor wanted to go. My instructor had a girlfriend in Oakland, so that's where we ended up (Laughs). It was a good trip though, because we had to land a couple of times to refuel and these are strange fields and you learn procedure. Was in Oakland a couple of days, nothing spectacular.

MIKE: That hasn't changed (Laughs).

MCCONNELL: Yeah. Back to Del Rio, when we finished at Del Rio we got another leave, which was too short to come home. So, that kind of fizzled, it didn't go anywhere. The next stop is to go to Barksdale is OTC, Operational Training Command. This is preparation for combat. This is where you get your crew. Interesting experience in the fact that about the second day you were there and got acclimated you get called to a huge briefing, because now you get briefed. You're now learning. We go to this huge, indoor facility down there, part of a hangar. Guy gets up and he starts reading off crews. So I get called, I'm first pilot, I get called and I walk over to an X on the floor, and he reads off five other names and these guys are supposed to join me. I get five guys, and I'm looking at them and they're looking at me (Laughs). So my copilot turned out to be Bob Hubbard, who is twenty-seven, married, got kids and he's looking at me and I'm looking at him and he's got a few gray hairs coming. I thought "Oh man, what the hell did you do wrong?" (Laughs) We got him and John Helsing, from Pittsburgh, who was my bombardier, and let me see... oh God, my crew chief, how the hell can I forget him? Anyhow, Matychak.

MIKE: Matychak, yeah.

MCCONNELL: Basil Matychak. You know, Matychak, "Where the hell did you come from?" Then there was Johnson, he was a kid from West Virginia, he was the tail gunner, and Moolick, what the hell was his first name? Again, "Where'd you're family come from?" (Laughs). He was twenty-seven. Anyway, I gather these guys and all of a sudden you know, I'm daddy.

MIKE: But you're younger than most of these guys.

MCCONNELL: Well, I'm twenty. Twenty years old and I'm responsible for you guys, you guys get into trouble, I'm in trouble. I don't know you, you don't know me. So you go through a hell

of a lot of bonding. It was interesting. You go out, you work as a crew. You've got no instructors except people on the ground that say "This is your assignment, go do it. Here's your airplane number." You grow up damn fast. Occasionally some major, that's what they were, would walk out to your airplane and say, "Lieutenant, I'm flying with you today." Well, "Are you first pilot?" "No, I'm copilot." That's the way they checked you, and you've got an ordinary assignment that day and you go about it. I learned formation flying with the Free French no less, who we couldn't communicate with because they don't speak English and we don't speak the French (Laughs). This got hairy at times.

MIKE: What were these guys doing training out west if they were Free French pilots that escaped France?

MCCONNELL: I didn't see any of them until we got to Barksdale and there were only, maybe six crews down there.

MIKE: Were they part of their own special unit, or were they part of a larger...?

MCCONNELL: No, they were off by themselves, their own little group. We'd just fly with them. We'd get assigned to go out to such and such an area and meet such and such planes. Literally, that's what you did, you went out there and you'd see some planes flying around. "Who the hell are you?" That's how you'd get together.

MIKE: A rendezvous, basically.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, and that's why I say it got to be fun, because you couldn't communicate with these guys. We did lots of night flying, I had a great experience down there. As I say, there majors ride with you for check rides. I went out and there's a major by our plane. I thought, "Oh shit." So, we introduced ourselves and get in. I started the engines and got permission to take off. We take off down the runway and all of a sudden this guy just goes nuts. He's screaming "Stop it, don't take off! Stop it! Get down on the ground! Stay on the ground!" I thought, "What the hell's your problem?" Because, I'm showing everything is green on my panel. Well, he's looking out the window and I glance over real quick. Christ, there's oil going everywhere. What happened is that Barksdale's got a ten thousand foot runway, we ended up in the mud, off at the end of the runway. We were literally sitting in the mud and there's steam coming up off the wheels because the brakes are hotter than hell. (Laughs) This guy, he's looking at me, he said "You did a great job, lieutenant, you did a great job." (Laughs) He definitely didn't want to go up with us after that. I did lose an engine down there. I took off and we no more than got off the ground and we completely lost an engine. Of course its panic time, because that old B didn't fly very good on one engine. So, Hubbard quick as hell, he told the tower we'd got an emergency. The tower said, "Where are you going?" I told them, "We're coming right back. A hundred eighty degrees." Well, turning with only one engine is not the greatest thing to do, but there was nowhere else to go. Barksdale is surrounded by a city and there's just no open places. So, I got it around and got back down. Poor Helsing, the bombardier, he about kissed me that day, and he

and I were not the greatest of friends. But again, time went fast. I did get some time off there. Headed to Chicago, met my girlfriend. Anyway, came to the point down there was that you had a certain curriculum to follow. The quicker you got it done, the more time you got for your leave. We agreed among ourselves that we'd fly anytime we could get an airplane, with the idea that Hubbard wanted to go home and see his kids and everybody had some place to go. So, we did. We worked hard and we played hard. But the time went quick. We were in great shape and had gotten ourselves in a position where we had a good ten days coming up that was going to be ours. About three days before we were free to go, I got called to the orderly room. I went over, and I'm thinking, "What the hell did I do wrong?" I didn't do anything wrong, except that we were ahead on our training. There was another group scheduled to leave in a day. What happened, one of the guys' mother suddenly became very ill and he got an emergency leave, which left a crew in that group without a pilot. I had a choice, I could go alone with that group, or they said I could take my crew and replace them. Nice choice (Laughs). So, I argued as much as I could argue and that got me nowhere. So, I went back and told my gang, called them together, and said, "Hey, here's the situation." They said, "We go as a group." That's what happened. A day later, we got on the train. We went from Barksdale to Savannah, Georgia. At Savannah, we were supposed to get a brand new B-26, in fact a G model, which was a new model, which had a bigger wingspan and a couple other changes which were supposed to make it safe. Which is a big deal going to combat.

MIKE: Did they produce B-26s in Savannah?

MCCONNELL: No, they were all made in Baltimore. So, out of Savannah you could go to the Pacific, to Alaska, anywhere. When we got there we had no idea where the hell we were going or anything. Well, the first thing that happened, we didn't get an airplane. That was a dead give away that we were going to Europe. We hung around in Savannah for the better part of a week, just doing nothing. Suddenly, the word comes, "Ok, the train will be here and you're going bye bye, you're going to the ETO (European Theater of Operations)," as they called it. We got hauled up to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey, which is just south of Jersey City, a huge place. This is overseas for the infantry, you name it. We were assigned to a particular group of guys and we assumed we were probably going over on the *Queen Mary*, that's the way most of the Air Force guys went over. Well, guess what? We didn't get the *Queen Mary* (Laughs). We got on an old, would've been a British vacation cruise ship, pre-war. What a, oh it was awful, just plain awful (Laughs). English cooks on it and we were double loaded, when you're double loaded that means you've got a room for twelve hours, the next twelve hours you spend on deck, somebody else has got your room. That's the way we went overseas, for two weeks (Laughs).

MIKE: What about night time? Did you have to spend that on deck?

MCCONNELL: It didn't make any difference. You rotated.

MIKE: The north Atlantic in the middle of the night...

MCCONNELL: Yeah. Yeah, and there's nothing to do. You just sit. Of course, there are huge crap games going on. I've got to say, there's always a group of colonels and majors and sometimes one star generals. Well, these guys got the nice stuff. But not us, we're just plain old air crew. It was not a pleasant journey. It was better than our enlisted men, because unfortunately these poor guys were down in hammocks in the hold and that was really unpleasant.

MIKE: By this point, had you begun to speculate about what your combat experience might be like?

MCCONNELL: Well, you think its like you got taught at Barksdale, which is six planes. It was no more pre combat experience than nothing. I mean, combat is a huge shock. You've got to be tough because all of a sudden your life changes. When we got to England, we got trucked in the middle of the night to somewhere. To this day, I don't know where the hell it was. I think we landed in Liverpool and somewhere within twenty to twenty-five miles of Liverpool is this camp. Its strictly a holding pen, for a short time. You got a bunk and a deck of cards and you're free at night. It got dark, because of double day light time, at four o'clock in the afternoon. You went out and got on the double decker bus that took you to somewhere and there was two or three pubs grouped in a village. There were locals and you could a get a drink. That was it. At ten o'clock on the watch, the guy says "Time," everybody goes out and gets on the double decker bus and goes back. I know we were close to a rail road, because we'd go over a couple of bridges and you could hear locomotives running. Can't seem 'em because its blacker than hell. You get back to your place and get to your bunk and get up the next morning. We were only there about, oh couldn't have been more than seven to eight days at the most, when the guy comes in the barracks and starts reading off names. Well, they're air crews and there were probably four that he read off. "Ok, your trucks are outside." You always kept your gear packed because you never knew when you were going. Went out, its dark, went over to an airfield somewhere. There was an old beat up, war weary B-17 sitting there that'd been stripped out. Loaded on, no seats, you're just sitting on the floor, back up against the fuselage. Your bag's thrown in the middle. We took off, flew for a while, they only time I ever had a ride in a B-17, and never saw the front end of it. We landed, somebody with a flashlight stuck it in and called my name, and said, "Get your crew and come on." The six of us got our bags, got out and there was, I think there were three jeeps sitting there. We got in a jeep and a couple of them took off one way and myself and Hubbard and Helsing were in one and we go another way. Its blacker than hell and we're going up looked like an old asphalt road. Well, what it was, was the taxiway. Welcome to A 60, this is home. We went up and the guy says, "Are you hungry?" "Hell yeah, we missed supper." We went over to what had been part of a barn, with one end of it blown off and canvas hanging. This was the mess hall. There were a couple of loaves of bread, a knife laying out and peanut butter and jelly. There's supper. Well, if you're hungry you eat peanut butter and jelly, thinking it tastes great (Laughs). In the meantime, there's a couple of guys who came in to the building. Guy said, "McConnell?" "That's me." He walked over and shook hands, God, what the hell was his name? I'll have to look it up in the book. Anyway, he said, "Be careful, this is hard walking when you

aren't used to it." Yeah it is, what we were walking on were narrow gauge rail road tracks with rails and steel ties welded on to the thing. The Germans had made it. They were left there when the Germans left that field and what they did, they laid these down and had stones in between them to keep you out of the mud. Because the place is nothing but a huge mud hole.

MIKE: Is this in Belgium?

MCCONNELL: This is France. This is Beaumont-sur-Oise.

MIKE: Yeah, that was taken over in October '44, I guess, by the 386th (Bomb Group).

MCCONNELL: Yeah, and I got there in October. What had happened, the group, the 386th, had just moved from England, where of course they lived in Quonset huts and had nice fields. They had in fact bombed Beaumont and done some of the damage (Laughs). Here we are. All we got, the runway was up the middle and the 555th was here (Gestures), the 554th, 553rd, 552nd, tent cities.

MIKE: And these were all squadrons of the 386th?

MCCONNELL: Yep.

MIKE: How many planes were in a squadron?

MCCONNELL: We had, let's see... well, let me put it this way. A normal bomb mission was thirty-six planes, oh which we supplied nine. Now, the actual planes, we had about fifteen or sixteen. Out of that, these guys busted their ass so we had nine every day. Anyhow, I got introduced, this is October, it is cold. You know, you wonder how it could get so damn cold in October, but it was cold. It was not cold enough to freeze the mud, but it was just damn cold. Anyhow, he led me over to a tent and I'm stumbling and falling behind him carrying my bag. Got in the tent and there's two other guys in there. I got introduced to them and there's a potbellied stove about yay big, no bigger, sitting in the middle of the tent (Gestures). One, two, three, four canvas cots, canvas, wood framed cots. He said, "That's yours." Ok, its got a straw mattress and a couple of blankets of shoddy wool of some kind. God, I was never so cold in my life as I was that night. I was scared and all I could think of was, "What a hell of a way to die" (Laughs). I didn't sleep, and all of a sudden some guy with a flash light comes in, goes over and wakes these guys, "Come on, missions up." What the hell are these guys doing? Well, I learned the routine real quick, but you know, it was a whole different lifestyle. You make do with what you've got. The cooks had portable stoves, it turned out the guys who were cooking were guys who misbehaved and got put in the stockade. They'd say, "If you want to cook, if you go up to the 555th and cook we'll get you out of here." All of a sudden you've got cooks. The rations came out every day from Paris on the back of a six by six (truck). I am not kidding you when I say that the turkeys come out in open card board boxes with their legs sticking out (Laughs). That's how you got food every day. Whatever came out, that's what was for supper. Whether

these guys ever saw it before or had any clue how to cook it, it didn't make any difference. The only constant thing was powdered eggs. That you always had by the ton. But anyways, we survived. We had a latrine was nothing more than some boards with some holes cut, stretched out over a hole in the ground. I shaved maybe once a week, I had a regular infantry helmet and you'd take the liner out of that and turn it upside down and you've got a basin. Try to heat a little bit of water on your potbellied stove, if you could find something to burn. The place was devastated; no trees, no fence posts, nothing. I used to write home, and it was true, I spent as much time scrounging, trying to live, as I did anything else the whole time we were at Beaumont. It was miserable (Laughs).

MIKE: Did the Germans leave equipment behind?

MCCONNELL: Yep.

MIKE: Any German planes that would've been able to take a look at?

MCCONNELL: Not at Beaumont, we did later on up in Belgium. We had a couple of planes there that they'd left. At Beaumont, they'd pretty well cleaned everything out except the ammunition dump. Which was just plain damn dangerous. That place had live stuff in it, and the further away you stayed from it the better. I got there in October and other than doing some local flying, at night primarily, around the field and just screwing around and stuff, I didn't get on a mission. I couldn't figure this out. All of a sudden the light dawned; sixty-five missions and you go home. Who's got priority? It ain't me, I'm the new guy. So, that's what was happening, all the old timers are trying to get their missions in. All of a sudden comes Christmas Day and things change. In the meantime, to compound the whole thing, the weather was absolutely horrible. The Bulge started and the whole story of the Bulge was the Germans taking advantage of the weather. I don't think we flew more than three missions from the time I got there until Christmas. The weather was that bad, they wouldn't let us go, or let them go, because I wasn't included (Laughs). So, we're sitting, killing time as much as anything. The only thing that made it acceptable was a guy by the name of Robert Meservey, was part of the group. He was a part of the so-called intelligence (section) of the 555th. Robert Meservey was Robert Preston of stage fame.

MIKE: Oh, really?

MCCONNELL: Greatest guy you'd ever want to meet, but his real name was Bob Meservey. He was a character, he had acting experience before the war and guys would get down and so on and he'd put on a one man show. He loved to play softball, that the joy of his life, to play softball. What good weather there was and if we could find some dry ground we had to go play softball. So, I liked to play to and he and I got to be pretty good friends. Anyhow, came the Bulge, Christmas morning, in fact the 24th we flew a mission. The report was that the weather was to get increasingly better, it was colder than hell, but it was clear. There was great need bomb hell out of the Germans, to close the Bulge up. It comes Christmas morning and I'm on a mission as

copilot to one of the old timers. Again, a whole new experience, never been on a mission. So, I went out and I started to learn the routine. Whether you're new or not, you've got a job to do, and as a copilot you had certain duties and you were expected to carry them out. We took off and got in formation, eventually, the first thing I know one of the gunners comes up and throws a whole bunch of shit in my lap and its heavy. "What the hell is this?" You put your helmet on and this is flak mail, you can put it on, or you can set it in front of you, you can sit on it, its up to you, that's your protection.

MIKE: This is basically body armor, to protect from shrapnel.

MCCONNELL: Its to stop shrapnel, pure and simple. So, they helped me get organized, because I sure as hell didn't know that I was doing. Of course, they're laughing. About that time we start getting shot at. This is the first time I've seen flak. The first ones coming up, you see them way ahead. I didn't know that, all I'm seeing is this black shit coming up (Laughs). I'm smart enough to know its flak. I'm ducking, and this pilot looks over and he says, "For Christ's sake, if it ain't red, quit that shit!" Just like that (Laughs). He was right, the black ones never hurt you, it was the one that were red in the center that you had to worry about.

MIKE: Basically, these belts of flak would be thrown up, artillery shells, they're time fused so they would explode in the air and throw out shrapnel.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, they've got a time fuse on them.

MIKE: And for elevation as well.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, yeah. That came while I was there, they started setting them with elevation, and of course then they started developing proximity fuses on them. At that time, on that particular mission, these things were just time shot. What you're doing of course, as this stuff is coming up, they're shooting a pattern. The guy who's leading you, if he's got any experience and he's been through it before, he can take a quick look, and there were guys who just had a knack for weaving through the pattern. They were good at it. There were other guys that couldn't miss this stuff, they'd fly you right into it. Real quick, you knew who was good and who was bad.

MIKE: You couldn't fly above it, there was no way, you had to basically fly straight through?

MCCONNELL: The Germans were smart; they had a sixth sense to know where you were going. There's only so many targets down there. They can see the direction you're going and they can say, "Ok, these guys are going here." So they set their pattern up to suit that. In order for the bombardier to have a decent shot of hitting the target, you've got to fly straight and level for a period of time, to let him pick the target up in the bomb sight and get everything set up. Now, that's only two or three minutes, but that's a long time up there (Laughs).

MIKE: Right.

MCCONNELL: So, up until then, we can weave. As I say, I'm learning this on the fly, I'm getting started up. We went out... I'm trying to think, it seems we went after a rail road bridge that morning. Didn't particularly do a great job on it. As soon as you do drop your bombs, what you use is a toggle air system. The first eighteen planes have a bombardier, in fact has two, the lead plane's got a guy and then there's a backup on about the fourth plane back. If something happens to him, the second bombardier, he's supposedly got the target. Now, when they drop, everybody drops, is how it works. If its done right, you get a beautiful pattern, everybody's in formation, everybody's level, its great. Most of the time it ain't so great. As soon as you drop its get the hell out of here time, and the leader peels off and he takes off right or left in a diving turn and you go screaming of there, get the hell out of the flak. The Germans, once they see you turn, they 've stopped shooting at you because that's just wasting ammunition. I got back off of that mission, oh, roughly lunch time. It took three hours and plus. I no more get out of the plane when the guy says, "Hey lieutenant, go grab something quick, you're on the afternoon mission." Hey, "Its Christmas, I don't need this shit." I did my duty today (Laughs) "You're going." So I went back out on the afternoon mission. That one, that wasn't too bad, that was a pretty much a milk run, that afternoon mission. That was my introduction to combat flying. From then on I flew with my crew. Its hair raising in the respect its work, just plain damn hard work. You start off, you're sitting in a hard stand, there's these planes scattered around with sandbag barriers all around you (Gestures). You start your engines at a particular time, then you know that in order to get into the formation at the right point, you've got to pull out of you hard stand and get in the duck parade at the right spot. Ain't nobody going to wait on you. So, you're sitting there and you're trying to remember, I've got to count so many planes and then me. Then you taxi down this miserable damn narrow strip of asphalt, its up and down hill, I mean there's no gradient. Whatever the contour of the land was, that's it. Your brakes get hot, and you're trying to keep from chewing the tail off the guy in front of you and hope to God the guy behind you is watching what he's doing. You've got a full bomb load, full ammunition load, you've got a full gas load, this airplane is heavy. It doesn't want to do what you want it to do. Its just, as I say, its hard work. So as you get down to the runway, here's 555, 554, sometimes, we're ahead, sometimes they're ahead (Gestures). Depends on, you alternate positions. The 53rd and the 52nd are over on this side, so what you do is you get nine planes off, of which all belong to the 54th, let's say (Gestures). You pull out on the runway, one on each side, and this runway has got a hump in the middle, you can't see the end. Green flare goes up from the control tower, guy one, he's got his engines going as hard as they'll go releases his brakes and he starts to go and you start counting. When you hit thirty, you go. As soon as this guy got out of there, one of these guys pulls on behind, and that's the way you take off. Every thirty seconds an airplane is moving. You've got three airplanes on that runway at one time, of which you can see maybe one. The other two are over the hump and you hope to Christ they're gone. You get off the ground, staggered, slide out a little to stay out of the blast coming off the guy ahead of you, because its rough and you're fighting altitude, hoping to Christ the engines stay together and you're trying to gain altitude. Now, you go out roughly fifteen seconds and then you start the turn. While you're doing this, here's the leader, up here,

he's already turned and he's down here (Gestures). You're trying to get up on him. The leader had responsibility to fly a nice, steady pattern. Some of them did, some of them, Christ, I don't want to see them on the road (Laughs). It's a really hairy time because you're fighting for altitude, you're fighting to catch up, you're trying to get in formation. Many a morning it was way below zero and I'm sweating; you're working that hard. Once you get into formation, it doesn't get much easier, because you're holding your wing in behind the guy alongside you and holding that tight. Every time he moves, you've got to move right with him. I got good at it, I can truly say. In fact, I enjoyed some of it. You know, you're supposed to take slight, gentle turns, he'd get sloppy and get up here and you're way down here trying to slow down to stay behind him. This guy up here, he's pushing like hell, paddling everything he can to keep up (Gestures). You have to anticipate this stuff.

TAPE STOPS

TAPE STARTS

MIKE: Sorry for the interruption, we had a phone call. We were talking about flying in formation, walking through a mission.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I kinda lost my train of thought (Laughs).

MIKE: You were talking about taking off, getting into formation.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, well, as I say, you were working. A lot of people, you know, ask you if you were scared, this sort of thing. The answer is yeah. But, I for some reason seemed to end up on the wing of the colonel, who was a great person, or somebody similar. I don't know why, maybe it was planned, maybe it was pure coincidence, but I was more concerned with getting hell for not doing a good job than I was anything else (Laughs). You are, you're busy, you're concentrating. Yeah, there's scary times, but it becomes a routine after a while. Anyway, after you come back off the mission, or on your way back, or you made your turn off the bomb run, you're starting to lose altitude and get back to friendly territory. Supposedly the leader knows where the flak concentrations are and he's leading you around these. Most of the time, it turned out that way, occasionally he slipped up and you'd get shot at a second time just for good measure. In fact we lost a plane in just such an incident. But, you're suddenly across what we called the bomb line, which is friendly territory. You get rid of the flak suit and get your helmet off and slide back. The guys that smoked would get a cigarette going and so on. You kind of ease your way back home. Some guys would pick up some damage which didn't permit that, they had to fight their way back. But generally, you kind of relaxed. I flew nine missions on the B-26, seven of which I was a pilot. Come a day when we started training to fly the A-26, as it was known at that time. This plane only had two people, the pilot and a gunner. It was much faster, turned out to be a beautiful airplane. In my case, we started ground school, again somebody had patched together and we stood around in the mud and we had ground school for the new airplane. This went on for a period of a couple of weeks. Actually, we had written lessons. We'd end up

with mimeographed paper sheets and we had to take them back and fill them out, turn them in, and get graded. It was like going back to school (Laughs). It did give us some basics of the airplane. I came back off of a mission one afternoon and it was starting to get dark. One of my buddies, a fella by the name of Rhodes Elan came over to me and he said, "Lay off the booze." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I want to check you out on the A-26." I said, "Oh, ok." Well, what he was referring to was, there was always a whisky bottle after you debriefed and you were welcome to take as big a slug of it as you wished. I'd partake, but that day I didn't. As soon as I debriefed I found Rhodes and we went over to the A-26. We had one per squadron. He got in and I followed him in, after I learned how to get into the damned thing. It had a pilot seat, but there was a gang way which was originally had been built to house a cannon. Cannons, weren't used and it made a beautiful place throw a bomb fin casing in, which is like a footstool, and you can sit on it. That was the riding place, you had no belt, no nothing, you were just sitting there. So, Rhodes started the engines and I was paying attention, because this was my chance to learn. We taxied out, got clearance; he took off and went up. He cut one engine out and I got a sense of what happened if you were to lose an engine. In probably twenty, twenty-five minutes he demonstrated quite a few things. He said, "Ok, let's change seats" So we did, and he climbed out and I slid in behind him and so I got to fly the A-26. I pretty much followed the things he had done, but to get a feel of it. I flew around for twenty-five or thirty minutes, dropped the wheels, dropped the flaps, cut an engine. So, it was starting to get dusk, so I said "Ok, let's switch seats" and he said, "No, take it in and land it." I never landed this damned thing before (Laughs). He said, "It's an airplane, and you're a pilot." So, I did. Surprisingly enough it landed very nicely and it was a beautiful airplane. Two days later, there were fifty-two brand new A-26s came in with ferry pilots. They promptly got out and got in fifty-two of our B-26s and took off, and we were operational on the A-26. I flew the next, I think I flew four missions in a row, because we only had nine checked out pilots. What I did, I had one of my buddies ride on the mission with me, that's how they got checked out. It sounds crazy, but it's how things were done and it worked. So I flew the next twenty-three on the A-26. I had a vast variety of experiences, some of them not pleasant, some of them went ok. I got back, got many holes in the airplane, fortunately none in me or in Matty (Matychak), who was my gunner. The war was over May 8th and in fact I had been briefed for, I'm sure, three or four times to go out on missions the first of May the end of April that never happened because the ground army was moving so fast that they either were in a position where we were in danger of hitting them, or they had completely overrun our target. So toward the end, there was a ten day period in there that really there wasn't a whole lot of air activity for us. Come the great day the word was out that it was over, everybody went off on celebration. After drinking too much and getting damn sick, I ended up the second day after it was over, I had the privilege of flying our lonesome B-26, which we used kind of as a transport, to Germany, and picked up thirteen of our prisoners of war, from the 555th. How the communication worked to get these guys to where I could pick them up I'll never figure out, but it happened. I brought these guys back, fortunately they were in reasonably good health and hadn't had too many bad experiences as prisoners. We spent a few days kind of not knowing

what the heck was going on, then there came another day when there was a briefing, and kind of a strange experience of going in the briefing room and looking around and realizing that all the old timers were missing, the guys who had more time in than we did. The group who was left were all guys like myself, who had somewhere between thirty or thirty-five missions. You suddenly realized, something's going on here. The Colonel came in and revealed a map, which happened to be of Okinawa, which at that time hadn't been invaded. It was an X, that's your new home. He outlined a regimen of training that we were going to do over the next six weeks, mostly learning how to skip bomb, how to use our fourteen machine guns in strafing, stuff that we had only done one time in European combat. Part of it was fun, it was hard work, because we set up three, four hour period a day to fly. One day we flew two periods, the next you flew one. We did this for six weeks, I've got to say part of it was fun, simply because after we would go to the skip bombing range, it didn't take long to drop the bombs and go over and empty the machine guns, it was fun time, chasing horses in Germany. We were told it was low level, we were not supposed to fly above tree top level once we finished our bombing and gunnery. I guarantee you, we didn't. We had fun. I used to fly up to... what's the big port in Belgium?

MIKE: Antwerp?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, Antwerp. That was the port of debarkation for ground forces going home. Of course, they'd bring their truck and all the equipment and stuff. There were rows of this stuff. All was painted on the numbers, the unit outfit. We'd fly down the rows to see who was going home (Laughs). I was hunting for the 104th (Infantry Division), to see when Charlie was going to get home. You know, it sounds stupid, but we did (Laughs).

MIKE: Yeah, to go back to the combat missions for a second. Debriefing, what did that consist of?

MCCONNELL: Well, what you did, as soon as you came back you'd pull the plane in the hard stand and fill out the log for the plane. Get your parachute off, get on the ground. A truck or a jeep would pick you up and take you down to the debriefing tent. The intelligence guys had little tables set up, three or four of them and you'd take your turn. Not that much to it, you'd simply give them a brief description of what you did, what you saw, and what you thought the results were. It was pretty simple, except a few times you'd get in a couple of incidents and it'd take a little bit more time. What they were trying to do, they got everybody's viewpoint of a particular—we'd lose a plane. "Ok, you saw it this way, they saw it, they saw it." To give them a pretty comprehensive picture of what happened.

MIKE: Did you have bomb sight cameras or gun cameras on the planes?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, we carried, in fact I've got some records of missions, wish I had them all. But I've got a few and actually, we never paid any attention to it. It was the photography section did it. I carried cameras, didn't even realize I had them. I didn't care.

MIKE: Ok, so there was a section of the 386th that would analyze film from each mission.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, that was their job, they set the camera in there, set the angle on it, what they wanted and that was all done in accordance with your position in the formation. Afterwards they'd come around and pick the film up and take it from there.

MIKE: What kind of targets were you hitting, on average?

MCCONNELL: I personally, I had, we had one famous railroad bridge at a place called Kons Karthaus. We'd bomb that damned thing, I swear, every third day. It was a little short railroad bridge, but it was important. We'd knock it down and the Germans would promptly put the damned thing back together. It was ridiculous how many times that we bombed Kons Karthaus. We bombed, bridges were a big target, ammunition dumps were a target, what they called communications centers. Now, somebody else had got to define it. It was a crossroads, to somebody it was important and needed wiped out. I bombed one time, oil refineries down in Austria, that's the mission we started out and knew damn well we couldn't make a round trip. Everybody had to get home the best way they knew how.

MIKE: This was your last mission, I think, in Linz.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I ended up in Linz, Austria and I spent the night in Darmstadt, Germany at a fighter field, because that's as far as I got.

MIKE: Right.

MCCONNELL: I did strafe a town one time. Again, not knowing what the heck we were doing. February 22, 1945. Let nobody kid you, both the Eight and Ninth Air Forces went after civilian targets. We went as a six plane group, which meant that our group, that particular day, probably was after seven or eight targets. Again, we bombed a little, short railroad bridge and actually hit it. Then we came back and strafed the town. Who was in the town? Who knows?

MIKE: Do you recall the name of the town?

MCCONNELL: No, I don't. I'm sure, maybe on a record book I could tell you.

MIKE: Ok, the interesting thing about that is that, you're flying a ground support mission, or a strafing run, that's the same time American forces were pushing towards the Rhine River, for Operation Grenade. I was wondering if it was in that area, flying back from your primary target.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, no this was done deliberately.

MIKE: Right, because the A-26s were built, from my reading up on it, they were built to bridge the gap between fighter and medium range bomber.

MCCONNELL: Yeah.

MIKE: They had guns in the wings and nose, and could be used in a ground support role.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, we had fourteen, forward firing guns. There were ten permanently front mounted and then four in the back turrets that Matty had, that I could take control of, and make them fire forward. But it's questionable how much good that does. It's a terror tactic, it's psychological. Actual damage...nah! I doubt it. All I did was hit red tile roofs on buildings, and yeah, it was great, there was red tile flying everywhere. But actual damage? Very questionable.

MIKE: I recall as a kid that, weren't you put in touch with a German guy that was in that town? Or another location?

MCCONNELL: Another location. We'd bombed a bridge in that town. Its... I don't know. You're kind of, when you're up that high and flying in formation, you're kind of removed from any personal contact on the ground. Its sanitized war. Believe me, I don't want to be an infantryman (Laughs).

MIKE: Right. Did this German guy that contacted you, what was his purpose of getting in touch?

MCCONNELL: I just, pure, as much as anything I think, nostalgia.

MIKE: Because he was a kid, I think, a child.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, he was a child, thirteen, fourteen at the time. He remembers the tails, the yellow tail. We had a distinctive tail marking. He somehow found out afterwards exactly who that was, who had those tails. Personally, from my perspective, it was just another mission.

MIKE: Right. Did you ever encounter the German air force on your missions?

MCCONNELL: There was only one time that I was on a mission that we had a fighter plane attack. Again, my recollection of it is pretty minor, in the respect that I saw the planes out of my corner of my eye, coming up, and recognized them as German fighters. But again, you're so damn busy keeping up with that formation. Now, what happened is Matty is sitting back there, and he's got a full view of this, and he's chattering in my ear. I'm getting a blow by blow from him and all he's telling me is "Make her go faster Mac. Make her go faster." (Laughs) All he wanted was to get the hell out of there.

MIKE: So you guys were not deployed to the Pacific?

MCCONNELL: No, what happened, very briefly, we went through the training, which took us into July of 1945. We got orders to pack our gear and we were told that we were going to take our planes to Cambrai, France. Which had been a B-26 field. That there we would pick up a bomb bay tank and that would equip us to fly the southern route back home. We were to bring our planes home. Everything went fine. We got to Cambrai and there's airplanes everywhere, no bomb bay tanks. So after several days of "What in the hell is going on?" and "Let's go home" and this kind of stuff, word came down that if we wished to volunteer, we could fly the northern

route home, if we could prove we could get five hours flight time on our standard gas. To achieve that, everybody did it. To it, honestly, you had to do what we called slow flying. Its just like taking your automobile out, instead of driving sixty-five, you drove forty-five. So we're up there slopping around and instead of flying 230 miles an hour we're flying 190. Slopping around, half flaps down to get five hours. I never got five hours. When I got to where I decided I was running out of gas I went in and landed and said I made my fly hours. Just as simple as that. "Let's go home."

MIKE: Right.

MCCONNELL: So, came a day, very shortly thereafter, where they sent a group of us up. It must have been, oh probably oh thirty, thirty-five planes in my group and gave us a group number for radio call purposes. First off was Wales. There was a British field which the RAF (Royal Air Force) had already started to close down, but would gas us. The deal was that we could fly the northern route. We had to go to Wales, from Wales we went to Iceland, from Iceland, to Greenland, from Greenland to Newfoundland, and from Newfoundland to Bradley Field in Hartford, Connecticut. All those jumps took a minimum of four hours under the best of conditions and get some head wind and it could take longer, which is pushing it with us. Weather had to be good at both ends before they would release us. Ok, so we were let loose out of Cambrai. Take off like a bunch of ducks and we all get to the RAF field. When we get there the girls who were basically running the field just directed us to pull off the runway and park. We're just parked out on the grass. We're, wherever this field was, was just literally a few hundred feet off of the ocean. The field itself had no facilities for us. Those facilities were closed down, or being used by the British. They gassed us and as far as we're concerned, that's it, we're on our own. I had two cases of K rations. I had a kid from Brooklyn who had a lot of pull somewhere to get a ride home. He was riding with me, I could've cared less about him. If I'd have dropped him in the ocean, it would've been alright (Laughs). Told him, "That case is yours, this case is mine. You've got a sleeping bag, I've got a sleeping bag." That's the only thing they gave us to make the trip with, and I slept out under the wing of the plane. This is August now and day time, half a dozen of us would go down to the beach and swim and lay in the sun and you just killed time. At night, if you wanted to walk about two miles there was a pub, way down. You know, you'd think a long time whether you wanted to walk that far for a beer (Laughs). Most of the time it wasn't worth it. We're waiting on good weather in Iceland, our weather was perfect. The night of, I'm not sure what time it was in Wales, but the day the war was over in Japan, after the second bomb, I was in the sack and asleep. All of a sudden all hell breaks loose. The English were out there shooting flares, shooting guns, hollering and shouting, driving trucks around. Well, finally the word gets passed down that the Japanese had surrendered. So you say, 'Ok, thank God I ain't going to Okinawa (Laughs). You, know, so what, I'm supposed to head to Iceland, and you went to sleep, and that was it. In the morning, at the crack of dawn, rolled up the sleeping bag, threw it in the plane, called the tower, got permission to start the engines and get the hell out of there. And we did, everybody took off whenever they were ready. You had a bearing to Iceland, and

you had a wee little strip map of the airport around Iceland so you could pick out some landmarks if you didn't hit it. Flew up there, had no problem getting to Iceland, spent about three days there, it would pour down rain everyday. Never moved out of the hut, there were Quonset huts there. Just stayed in there and stayed dry and warm. Come the report, "Hey the next morning the weathers supposed to be good, head to Greenland." Had a choice, going to Greenland; Greenland's got a big jut to the south, we're coming kind of this way (Gestures). The field in Greenland is famous, because how you got into that field, was you approached from the ocean, they had a ship sunk at the head of the fjord. You flew up the fjord, and at a point you had to make a sharp left turn and as soon as you made that turn you're supposed to see a second sunken ship. At that point, you drop your wheels, drop your flaps, start a ninety degree right turn. Welcome to Greenland. The runway is at the edge of the water, and it goes up hill. Never used your brakes because there was no way you would ever come off the end of the runway (Laughs). Which ended in the ice cap. The field there was run by the Navy. Again, these guys are sitting with their baggage in C-54s at that time, waiting for us to come through. We're the last group coming before winter. All they want to do is gas us, get us the hell out of there. I elected to go across the ice cap. Now, the ice cap is 12,000 feet. That's 2,000 feet up in the no oxygen zone, to start with. I started across and I got into nothing but can't see, I'm on instruments. Next thing I know, I'm hearing "tick, tick, tick, tick, tick." Can't be, yeah, it is. Ice. Now I ain't got gas to go back down and around, I've got no choice but to go ahead and ease down. I see the ice starting to break up, and I hold it right there. Just as soon as its gone I sneak back up, because I got a bad feeling. That's the way I went across the ice cap, it only takes about twenty minutes but that was a long flight (Laughs). I break out on the other side, I had caught a cold and my ears are plugged. I had a hell of a time getting down, because the minute I'd started to let down, there pressure would build up. I finally battled it and got down. Of course I'm spiraling down right over the field and I can see the fjord. Swung out over the end of it, picked up the fjord, come up and there's the second ship, drop my wheels and there I am. We laid in Greenland two days, and again absolutely nothing to do, there's nothing but ice everywhere. Shitty weather, just stinking weather. Word come down its going to be clear, both ends tomorrow. You guys head out of here as quick as you can. Taking off you reverse the procedure, you go downhill and go out the fjord and take off. That was the longest stretch, that was a long way from there to Newfoundland. So, you're conserving gas, you're taking it easy and you know, sit there and ride. Now at this time, I don't know it, but I 've got a dose of scabies and I'm itching (Laughs). The sun is out, I'm sweating and I'm itching. Man, that was a long, long trip (Laughs).

MIKE: Oh no.

MCCONNELL: I had to have been 200 miles from Newfoundland and I start letting down, I want to get there (Laughs). We get to Newfoundland and laid in there for close to a week. Newfoundland weather wasn't all that bad, their fall weather. It was doing pretty good. But, Boston was socked in, bad weather, fog. Finally the word comes, "It's going to be good in Boston, get the hell out of here." Again, we were the last group going through for the winter. I

took off from there. I flew down to Bradley Field, landed. Oh God, there were planes stacked up there. A jeep came out and I followed him around through and he found me a parking place. So, I opened the hatch, stood up, and was trying to stretch a little and the guy in the jeep says, "Lieutenant, I just got two questions, do you want your .45 (pistol) and do you want your parachute?" I said, "I don't want either one of the goddamn things." (Laughs) He said, "Throw them down here then." He handed me a sheet of paper which was a receipt that he'd received my parachute and .45 and that was it. That night I got some good food, they had steak and the mess hall and "Welcome home boys." Got a shower and I hadn't had a shower since I'd left Wales and got clean clothes out of my bag. The next morning we rode the train from Hartford down to Indian Town Gap and got leave papers. Slept there over night, got up the next morning and got a bus ticket, got a greyhound bus out of Harrisburg and come into Pittsburgh, got on the train, rode the train back to New Castle. That was it, the group joined at Greensboro, North Carolina. I had thirty day leave which got extended fifteen days. By the end of that time, I'd drunk all the beer I could stand and it was time to get on with it. Went back to Greensboro, which had decent barracks. At Greensboro, you had a choice, you could sign on as an engineering officer and you were still in. They guaranteed you four hours of flying so you picked up your flying pay. Other than that, there was no idea where the hell you would end up. The other option was to sign off. I thought about it, but if I can't fly I ain't staying. You know, I'm looking and there 10,000 guys there and literally in the next barracks was some of the Red Tails, from Italy that had come in. Nice guys, I did talk to some of those guys, never identify any of them at this point, but you know, you find out "Hey, they're just pilots like you." I decided my chances of ending up with anything decent wasn't good.

TAPE STOPS

TAPE STARTS

MIKE: Ok, so we've stopped off last time at the end of World War II and your discharge form the service. Did you ever consider entering commercial aviation?

MCCONNELL: Yep. When I came back, I wrote a letter American Airlines and said, "I'm a pilot, I've got so many hours," etcetera, etcetera. I got a polite letter back and in so many words that said, "You and how many more?" There were of course at that time the guys in the transport service were eminently more qualified than me. All I was, was combat pilot. So, I very quickly put that aspect out of my mind. At that point, very frankly what I did, was at that time the famous 52/20 Club. That was, the veterans' situation, you got twenty bucks a week for fifty-two weeks, to find a job. To protect that you had to report back to your former employer, who was obligated to hire you if they had an opening. After thinking about it, you know the recognition is that I didn't know much about anything, and I'd better be careful. So, I went back down to former employer, which was Shaw Perkins. I was in full uniform and walked in I met a guy who was smart enough to recognize me for what I was. He said, "Ok, I've got plenty of work. If you're as good as you think you are, come on in and show me that you are. As far as I'm concerned, my

position is open.” Again, there’s a challenge, you know, you have just half-assed insulted me and told me I was no good, now I’m going to show you I am. So, I went back, he was as good as his word. In two weeks’ time he had bounced me from every position possible in that plant. I showed him that I did know. There was not that much to it. He recognized me for being a cocky smartass and the upshot of it was that after a couple of weeks he called me in the office and he said, “Ok, we’re going to start a second shift, its going to run from three thirty or four o’clock in the afternoon until next morning at eight o’clock. You’re in charge.” So, I figured, “Ok, he’s trying to be cute, and I’ll show you.” That’s how I got back at Shaw Perkins, I worked my tail off for about six weeks. Trying to work sixteen hours a day. Fortunately, the day guy, who was a good fella, helped me out. He stayed over an hour in the afternoon and had stuff pretty much lined up. He’d come out early in the morning, that way I staggered through six weeks. The end of six weeks, we had a strike, there stupid people down there stayed out for a period of time. I don’t recall just how long, but long enough to till they ran out of money. Coincidentally, about the same time we started to get order cancellations, because things were settling back into a peace time pattern and the demand for heating radiators and transformer coolers, the two things we made were settling back into normal commercial patterns. So, the people who went out on strike didn’t come back to work. We settled into an eight hour day. I ended up as the assistant plant manager, which worked out very well. I worked for a period of time under that circumstance, through that winter of ’45. By the time spring settled in, the plant manager decided that he had better opportunities. The guy who had brought me back decided he wanted to move on, he was kind of interim manager. I settled into a pattern working as plant manager directly for the owner, who was one hell of a man. He put up with me (Laughs). He taught me a lot.

MIKE: Is that where you met grandma as well?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, that’s where I met your grandmother. By September of ’46 I was starting the plant manager job, which entitled me to a secretary. That’s how I met your grandmother. Tom Cody, who I knew from before the war, Tom, the word was out that I was going to hire a secretary. Tom said to me, “Hey, I know a girl,” and Tom always knew girls (Laughs). I said, “Well, you know, what’s her background?” Well, she’s out of high school and a good friend of his wife’s. So, come a great evening when your grandmother was invited in to interview she came in and I was a dead duck right there (Laughs). I went home that night not only had she been hired but I told my mother that I’d met the girl I was going to marry. She was wearing a big diamond at the time, was supposedly engaged.

MIKE: Uh, oh. (Laughs)

MCCONNELL: So, here’s another challenge (Laughs). What happened, over a relatively short period of time I looked at her, and she looked at me and there was a mutual attraction and she invited me to take her to the Ellwood-New Castle football game, which was just before Thanksgiving. That’d been a traditional rivalry for years. She was from Ellwood. So she said she’d buy the tickets if I’d take her to the game. So, I said that’s a good deal (Laughs). As it

turned out, the day of the football game, which was a Friday, it poured down rain all day. It was still raining early in the evening and I called her on the phone, well, I didn't call her, I picked her up, just like I was supposed to. She insisted that I pick her up at a place that was right at the end of the big bridge in Ellwood City. I picked her up and she got in the car and I looked at her, and I said, "Joan, you don't want to go out and sit in the rain. I don't want to go sit in the rain, where do we go." (Laughs) We mutually agreed the football game was very secondary at that point. We had a problem and that was if we were going to see each other it had to stay out of Shaw Perkins. So we headed for Beaver Falls, you get down there, there's a place off of Main Street, which I'm sure it's gone at this point, but nonetheless was supposedly a candy store but it sold beer in the back. We went in there and sat and drank a couple of beers and talked hours. On the way home, finally, it's getting awful late, the football game had long since been over. I allowed as how I'd like to kiss her and she allowed that that was perfectly ok. So, that's how things got started (Laughs).

MIKE: Three kids and three grandkids later.

MCCONNELL: We got married sixty-seven years ago tomorrow. Her mother was, well, she was in favor of her supposedly boyfriend, who frankly was a skunk and she knew it. What her mother didn't know was that I had put her on a train in Ashtabula, back about the end of July. Joan went to New York City, where he was at and returned the ring and got on the train and came back to Ashtabula. Since neither of us cared to have a great, huge Russian style wedding, and again, we had some obligations to the company, which kind of dampened things down. We elected to go down to Maryland and we got a license one weekend and the second weekend we got married. Came home and all was forgiven and we had beautiful honeymoon up on Lake Erie in a cottage (Laughs). Went from there, and as you say, ended up with a nice family.

MIKE: So, final question, did you keep up any guys from your unit after the war? The reunion association started up in the '80s.

MCCONNELL: Well, what had happened, I was very busy working and besides building this house and a few other things. The group, as most World War II associations, set up reunions. The 386th had started the 386th Bomb Group etcetera. It's a great thing; I just didn't feel at the time that I could participate. However, I stayed in touch with my gunner, Maddechek. The rest of them I had attempted to stay in touch to stay in touch with my copilot.

PHONE RINGS

MIKE: It's your phone. We can go ahead and wrap this up. Alright.