

JAMES E. GILLESPIE

This is a portion of the oral histories of Northwest Missouri of the 1940's program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today is February 3rd, 2009 and we are here at TJ's Café in King City, Missouri, in Gentry County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and the assistant is Margaret Kelly and we are here with James E. Gillespie and his birthday is April 10, 1922 and he lived during the 1940's and served in World War II in the Army Air Force and was a Staff Sergeant. James we are going to start a little bit with your background.

James: OK

Joni: Tell us a little bit about what you parents did as an occupation, maybe a little bit when you were born, where you were born, a little bit if you had any brothers or sisters, tell us about that.

James: I was born in Bethany, Missouri and my folks were farmers.

Joni: No brothers or sisters?

James: Yah. Six. My older brother died when he was about 5 months old, had appendicitis and gangrene set in and then there was 6 of us after that so that made 7 I guess and I had 2 older sisters and a younger sister and two younger brothers.

Joni: So what was like – life was like in the 1940's before the war?

James: Oh, it wasn't easy but it was hard times when nobody had any money and you didn't worry about it because your friends didn't have any either and things were just kind of starting to come around – that's the year I graduated from high school and I went and got a job for a while and then I enlisted in the service.

Joni: What type of job did you do before?

James: I was a bellhop in a hotel.

Joni: How was that?

James: Interesting! Very interesting that's when every body like a salesman from St. Joe went through Bethany making his rounds he didn't drive back to St. Joe like they do now. He stayed all night at the hotel and then he called on what customers he'd missed the next morning and then he went on to the next town and that's the way that they done then they didn't have the automobiles or the roads that they got not.

Joni: What about propaganda during the 1940's before the war? What were they saying about China and Europe?

James: Well, I never heard much really I mean you know just got out of high school and everybody though well it looks like sooner or later we're going to have to go to the service and

Joni: Did they describe the Germans or Japanese in any specific way?

James: Really not anything until after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Joni: Where were you that day?

James: It was on a Sunday afternoon and I was in the lobby of the hotel listening to the radio when it came on the radio.

Joni: What feelings did you have at that point when you heard that?

James: Thought here I go.

Joni: Did you enlist or did you or were you drafted?

James: I enlisted.

Joni: You enlisted.

James: Because I wanted in the Air Force and so I enlisted so I could get in the Air Force instead of being drafted into the infantry.

Joni: Was there a specific job you wanted when you joined the Air Force, did you want to be a pilot?

James: Yeah but they had so many wanting to be pilots and we had to do something else first and then you could sign up if you wanted to go and I did and then I – well truthfully I don't think I made a high enough score. I know now you had to have a college education at that time in order to get into the flying end of it or the Officers Candidate School or anything but then later on in the war they dropped that and anybody that could pass the exam could but I didn't try again I liked what I was doing. I was a crew chief on airplanes and liked it.

Joni: What did you do, what were your duties as a crew chief?

James: Mechanic. You had charge of the airplane for 24 hours a day. It was your airplane and you saw that it was ready to fly every time the pilot was ready to go. We had fighters, P47's and we had to – better have it ready.

Joni: So how was your basic training camp, do you have specific memories, where were you – where were you during basic training?

James: Sheppard Field, Wichita Falls, Texas and we had to – when we done basic training we had to do KP of the morning and march in the afternoon. Everybody had 2 weeks of KP and you had to march in the afternoon after you got off the KP then after that then you started going to school for your specialized training – two week phases and everybody behind you the recruits come in they done 2 weeks KP and then they started to school and that's the way they done it until we got through.

Joni: Was that the only place that you did your training or did they send you any place else? Ah how was the barracks and the food?

James: Oh they was just 2 story wooden barracks, they were warm, comfortable, slept on those army cots and we had showers and everything was modern, they were nice I mean I had no

problem they were all just alike you know you didn't want to get in the wrong one after dark you'd get lost.

Joni: Did anyone get in the wrong one after dark?

James: I don't know. There was a lot of those guys that came in pretty looped sometimes you know. But you didn't want to ever have to scrub the floor with a toothbrush, they were big floors.

Joni: Did you have to do that?

James: No I never did have to do that but some of them did they gave you a toothbrush and started you out scrubbing the floors if you got in trouble.

Joni: How was social life during that time?

James: Fine. Oh all the guys were – pretty much all of them were good guys – the were the same thing as you were you know you all had the same goal and meet lots of friends and then they'd move on and that's the last you'd hear of them, a few of them you still heard from. My last close friend died 2 years ago and he was 90 years old.

Joni: So where did you go after your training, did you – were you stationed in a specific area – did you go over seas?

James: No I went to Key Field, Meridian – well the first thing we done we went to California to Douglas Aircraft and went to school for a month on certain airplanes that we never did work on and then we came back to Key Field Mississippi Air Base I forget what'd they call that – Meridian Air Base – no it was Key Field and we were there then until we got ready to go over seas and the shipped us to Camp Shanks, New York and shipped us over to England on a slow boat to China.

Joni: How was that boat?

James: You don't want to know. We ate smoked herring and boiled eggs and you could smell the ship before we got on it. You got 2 meals a day and it took – I think it was 13 days to cross the ocean.

Joni: Was it the same type of food every day?

James: Every day, every day.

Joni: Was it one of those luxury liners or was it ----

James: It had been at one time but it sure wasn't when we got on it because after we got off of it I don't know how many day it was they told us that it hit a land mine when it left Liverpool and sunk and everybody cheered.

Joni: How many people was on this ship?

James: I have no idea, no idea.

Joni: So you were stationed most of the time there in England?

James: No, no.

Joni: Where did you go from there?

James: I went from there to Omaha Beach, Sherburg, France and went all across France and Belgium and Holland, Luxembourg, Germany and then back home.

Joni: So you saw combat?

James: No

Joni: No combat?

James: Oh we got strafed a few times, something like that but we didn't go into any combat I mean we were awful close some times and they were shooting anti aircraft over us after we first got off the boat. We were the first complete fighter-bomber outfit that was into France in World War II. We had to go on a boat, we couldn't lie in the got us cut off from our base we was supposed to be after we got off the boat but they got us back on pretty quick. But we had to walk up that steep hill at Omaha Beach where those poor guys all got slaughtered. We had to walk and carry that big old duffle bag with your back up that steep hill and I was just a little feller I only weighed 130 some pounds then, THEN.

Joni: So is there a mission that stands out in your mind any place that you were stationed that was more memorable than another?

James: Well I remember D-Day when they done all the bombing and then we got on the boat and went across and then when they had the big push through that St. Low when they just bombed all day, all day, all day, it just the sky was black with airplanes.

Joni: Now where was this located at?

James: Sherborn, France – Omaha Beach.

Joni: Can you describe that day in more detail?

James: Oh just – they – one of our own airplanes the bombs had hung up and they come loose and bombed our area at noon when men was going to lunch and burnt up some airplanes and killed a few boys but that was the roughest combat that we had at any time I mean I was down in a fox hole and I think 100 guys got in after me but I was on the bottom, I couldn't breathe but you know – quick reaction but I never did have it bad never did really have it bad you know you slept with your clothes on sometimes you slept in a tent and it was cold and rainy and even slept in some hay shocks in northern France before we could get to tents we crawled in hay shocks we thought it was tough but anyway it wasn't tough you just done what you had to.

Joni: How were the people in the countryside did you ever see any people in France or Europe?

James: They were very friendly. I didn't know what they was saying we had very few people that could speak French you know. We were in France oh not that where we could you know understand a work or two now then we got over to Belgium and changed a little but France had

more than one dialect in France where it goes up to Omaha Beach and all they speak Flemish there and we had a guy there, my assistant crew chief could speak Flemish 'cause he was raised in Quebec and he came to the United States when he was 18 or 19 but he could speak Flemish he got along pretty good used him for a guide part of the time.

Joni: So who did you serve under, did you have a specific General or Commander that you can remember?

James: When we went overseas our group colonel of the 3 squadrons was a guy by the name of McLaughlin and he'd been in the Canadian Air Force he was American and then he was transferred over and he was our commander and I don't remember who the General was that was head of that whole deal couldn't tell you. Eisenhower was the main man when we were over there I mean for everybody was General Eisenhower.

Joni: Did you ever meet any of the Generals?

James: I saw Eisenhower one time but I didn't meet him I mean I was standing at parade on the taxi ramp and he was off over there that was the closest I got.

Joni: So what type of General was he?

James: Good General, fine man, I thought a lot of General Eisenhower now being personally acquainted with him but I liked him even when he was President he was a fair President well I'll say a good President, not outstanding but he was there at the time when a lot of the soldiers had come home or were coming home I recall he kind of understood their problems I think. I know he might not have understood the farm problems but he had people to do that. Those guys hire people to do that work for them.

Joni: So you said you were also in Germany?

James: Uh hum.

Joni: What was it like in Germany when you were there?

James: Well I didn't think it was bad. I think the Germans liked us better than the French did.

Joni: Did you come across any of the concentration camps when you were there?

James: Huh um.

Joni: Not in the Air Force of course you wouldn't be able to see concentration camps.

James: Their culture was so much different than ours I mean they'd have a big building and the barn and cows and horses would be down below and the people would live upstairs and then they'd go out to the farm every morning with a horse and cart and they'd clean out the barn and haul it out in a cart with a tank on and put it on the land and that was their way of life. Little villages they didn't have many fences much I mean wooden fence is what they were. They could raise more on a road bank than most farmers ran on the rivers. They farmed the road banks and everything. They cut their grain they still cut it with a scythe and a cradle and all and they did everything the hard way.

Joni: Was there a lot of construction, I mean a lot of the land destroyed with the bombings and everything?

James: You know I didn't get around enough to see that I know the town of Castle they leveled it, the Americans did because ah I don't know who the General was I won't say but he told them to surrender or he'd level the town and they wouldn't surrender so he leveled the town and it was a beautiful city and I guess now that it's been rebuilt and it's still a beautiful city. But most of the people over there treated us pretty good of course we was on farther where we was at wasn't so bad because we'd already been through but on farther they got – they was pretty mean some of them but old Hitler had toughed those soldiers they was all brain washed I mean, kill everybody you can but a lot of the people didn't see that I mean they hid some of them and stuff like that and sometimes pilots would bail out you know and then someone would shoot them after they got on the ground I mean wasn't supposed to – that was a rule of war but they did.

Joni: Was there a specific place in Europe that you liked better – location of any of the others while you were there?

James: No, I can't say that there was. My brother visited it after World War was through quite awhile, several years and he told me that places that we described as beautiful were tore up when I was there. Some of the things you saw their highways and stuff were amazing, they had super highways and we had gravel roads. Old Hitler he built that for to move his troops and stuff on. I know we spent all one day trying to bomb out a viaduct on the highway and we had to shoot rockets in underneath just keep shooting until they finally busted it out in order to keep the troops out so I mean they had wonderful highways, all the autobahns they were great.

Joni: Did you get any awards or medals while you were there?

James: I got some ribbons.

Joni: What were they for?

James: Going through the country. Serving – well if your group took part in that why when they put out a campaign you got one. I didn't do any fighting but I have 7 campaign medals, not all medals, most of them were just ribbons they put out you know. Got the _____, the French gave you that and hung it around me and I don't even know what that was you know.

Joni: Did you ever listen to Axis Sally or Tokyo Rose; did you ever hear what was going on with the war?

James: I heard Axis Sally she was the one that was in Europe, Tokyo Rose wasn't. I heard her a time or two on one radio, we all thought she was nuts.

Joni: What were some of the things she said?

James: I don't remember. She'd call some guy by name and I know you and know your family and call off their names and how did she get that you know, you don't know.

Joni: Were there members of your group that she called names off of?

James: No, not in my outfit there wasn't but I don't remember. Maybe these guys they just call their names maybe she got it wrong we didn't know but then we thought she was right.

Joni: When you had time for leisure, maybe you didn't but what did you do, did you have USO.

James: We'd go to the USO or Red Cross mostly USO if there was one there and you'd go to town sit around and drink a little beer and visit and some of the foreigners I mean they'd come and visit with you. We run across some guys once in a while – ran on to some guy in France one day we – no we was in Belgium – no it was France in Paris right after it was liberated and we run across this guy and he ordered some of us a round and we didn't know if we should trust him or not but he talked real good English and come to find out he had been over there in World War I and had married a French girl and stayed. He was a dental assistant but he was a nice guy I mean – but just fool around and sometimes we'd go take pictures and visit. One of the things that I remember was Lorraine's Cathedral that was the most beautiful thing you ever laid eyes on and nobody bombed it – it was beautiful I remember that and I saw the Eiffel Tower. All the bicycles would come up to the stop lights like the cars do here and these were bicycles. Maybe 2 or 300 bicycles come up to cross the streets in Paris, can you believe that, the traveled by bicycle or walked, very few cars when we were over there because they didn't have the gasoline.

Joni: What were you doing on D-Day?

James: On D-Day? I was at the hospital with diphtheria.

Joni: How did you get that?

James: I don't know. There was three of us in the European Theater that got the diphtheria, one of them was a Sergeant out of the 9th Armored Division and me in the Air Force and a doctor who was a Major had got it and he died and we two lived through it so

Joni: How long were you in the hospital for that?

James: Oh, I don't know, not very long I'm sure. When they found out what it was they didn't – we had a doctor that liked alcohol awful well and if it hadn't been for my pilot that I was crewing the airplane for I'd have probably died because he got suspicious of what it was and hollered for help and they put me in the ambulance and sent me down to the front line to the hospital, put a mask on me and they sent a medic with me and all and everything and I thought what are they sending me down there for and I got down there and it was – I believe it was a Spanish doctor took care of me, talked English and they isolated me immediately in the tent and then I – what's going on and they finally told me- said you have diphtheria, they gave me a test and he said we brought you down here, this is the only place we can get penicillin for you at the front line. Wounded soldiers, that's why you came down here and I remember they chained my bed two or three times during the night sweat through and the next morning he came in he said – well, you're still here he said I didn't expect to see you this morning. Made you feel good you know but I came right around pretty fast – seemed pretty good but I thought I was real strong and I got up to get up – they moved me then back up to the hospital and I got up one time to go to the bathroom and I fell flat on my face, I don't know whether I stepped on my shoe strings or tripped or – and somebody said you just didn't have enough energy to stand up but I know it took a lot out of me but I've always been a little short of breath ever since then – the doctor told me I would be and I've got a little spot or two on my lungs.

Joni: Did you get to go home after that or when you got better did you stay?

James: No, I went back to the outfit, they didn't send you home then, you had to be in bad shape to send you home – they didn't have anything to send me home for. You didn't get to go home for nothing when you was in World War II. Not like now, didn't have a cell phone and I couldn't call home. Girl from here in town her husband calls her every other night from Iraq.

Joni: How did you feel about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

James: I thought it was great.

Joni: Did you agree with Truman?

James: I agreed with Harry Truman. I wasn't a _____ of Harry Truman but Harry Truman was a good President and he done a good job and he should've dropped the bomb, I admired him for it. I knew Harry Truman personally when I was grown up – just met him one time and visited with him and I found out if he was a Republican – Harry Truman _____ he'd tell you real quick, he was a very outspoken man but he done the job I mean and I don't care what his politics was I admire him it took a lot of nerve to drop that atomic bomb.

Joni: So where were you that day?

James: I think I was in that hospital with that diphtheria, I think that's where I was I'm not sure but I think that's where I was the day they dropped the bomb.

Joni: When and how did you get home?

James: By boat.

Joni: When did they let you go home?

James: Well, no I fibbed to you I went back to my outfit after I got so I was alright and we was there a while and the war was over and they put these chain things around – some of the guys had a lot of service kept them over – Army occupation a while and the younger guys they sent home because they equipped us to go to south seas to Japan and in the mean time the war was over and we got to St. Louis – do you want discharge or do you want to go on and what do you think after all that – I discharged and went home. Thirteen days from the time I got on the boat in Holland, Antwerp I was sitting at home in my folks.

Joni: Did they give you a reception when you got home?

James: No, they didn't even know I was coming.

Joni: So you surprised them.

James: Called and they were telling me. They didn't have a gravel road then, mud roads and it had rained and it was muddy. My dad came out to the highway to get me in a team and wagon. I remember the reception I got from the old collie dog.

Joni: What was that?

James: He was in the wagon and he jumped all over me and licked my face I just sit down and cried

Joni: He was glad to see you.

James: Yeah, so was my dad, they was all glad to see me but then as far as a reception that I ever remember about, I remember that old dog.

Joni: How do you think the people treated you when you returned home?

James: Treated me? Great, no problem.

Joni: Did it take you long to adjust back to civilian life?

James: Oh, I don't know, it's hard to say I just went on like I hadn't been gone I was just back home getting back into the routine.

Joni: What did you do after you came home?

James: I helped my dad on the farm for awhile and then I got married.

Joni: Did you meet your wife before you left?

James: We grew up in the same neighborhood but I hadn't seen her for years I knew from – I tell everybody I found my wife in a haystack. That's true she was about this tall and I was about to say she was a year younger and my dad was putting up hay at he granddad's house and he took me home and she was there and we played in the haystack, three or four years old but then she – after I got home she came back home and all that and we got acquainted got married. I always tell everybody I was the last available bachelor in town. That'll be 62 years the 10th of May.

Joni: That's a long time.

James: I don't know how I put up with her that long.

Joni: She must have been your soul mate _____.

James: Yeah.

Joni: Did you make any friends; did you stay in contact with them when you got back?

James: Well one guy that I was real good friend with he come to visit me and met my wife's sister and married her down to Garner City, Missouri and one guy I called Churchill most of them I kind of lost track of, I knew where they was but one guy he and I were real good friends there was about 6 of us that ran around together and he lived in Atlanta, Georgia and we wrote back and forth all the time and he and his family was on a trip one time and when we first moved here forty-some years ago he came by to see us and stayed all night or two I don't remember and then I didn't see him, we kept in contact all the time and my oldest daughter moved to Atlanta and was living there and we went to visit her one time so when he lived over about 100 miles, he'd retired about 100 miles east of Atlanta and we went over to see him, visit him and then a

couple of years ago he died and he was 90 years old and had Alzheimer's, that's terrible, just terrible.

Joni: Did you join the American Legion or VFW?

James: Yeah.

Joni: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

James: Oh yeah.

Joni: After the war were you concerned about the Soviet Union's spread of communism?

James: Not really because I thought we had won the war and I thought we was a strong enough country and nobody was going to do anything – I still think we are strong enough country I know we've got some problems I hate to think what happened after 9/11 if we hadn't of done something. I think we should have done it and got out and not tried to do as much as we've done but it's been – things are so different now I mean no comparison they contact home all the time and they have this where they tell everybody where they are going tomorrow – we couldn't hardly tell each other if we knew where we was going the next day and I don't see how we can even fight a war. I think we got in there a little quick, I don't think we had enough equipment and soldiers together to get in and do what we needed to do and there's always all the graft and stuff – I don't know why we should have to rebuild all that stuff for them they started it but we do – I don't agree with all that stuff but still the best comes around home it's a good old country.

Joni: If there was one thing that you could say about the 1940's and World War II that you want to share with that caused you to say what would that be? Something that stood out in your life.

James: Nothing because there would be no point because things have changed so much. Well just like the holocaust it's getting to the point that kids this year – there was no holocaust that's all propaganda I mean you know and they wouldn't listen to you and there's no use beating your brains out trying to – they call you a liar – ah that didn't happen you're just making that up. I just _____ about trying to tell them anything and I never did anything that was real dangerous I had it pretty easy I'm not sorry I went, I'm glad I went, if I had it to do over I'd do the same thing. I think some of these boys some of them are going because jobs is hard to get and they get in the service – get paid and they get a big bonus going in but some of them are actually going because they want to do something for the country, I'll take my hat off to them. That's the way I feel about it. It's a great world.

Joni to Margaret: Do you have any comments?

Joni: I think that's been a great interview

James: Thank you. Don't you think it's a great world?

Joni: There's some that changed a lot between

James: And we're going to see a lot of change pretty quick and all.

