

Tim Crow- Hi this is Tim Crow. I am a volunteer here at the Library of the Chathams in Chatham, NJ. I am here with Joe May this morning. Joe is veteran of World War II and was part of the Army of Occupation in Hanau, Germany. We are going to let Joe take it away. First question Joe. You were born in Ridgewood, NJ- let's start there. Lead us up to how you got involved in getting yourself over to Germany.

Joe May- Um, well, I was born at a bad time. It could have been worse if I was born a little sooner. I would have gone in service sooner probably. But anyway, I graduated high school in class of '44, 1944 Ridgewood High School and every one of us males, anyway had nothing to look forward to except service because WWII was in full swing. I enlisted before my 18th birthday in the Army Air Core, probably because a good friend of mine had enlisted. And another friend of mine waited to be drafted. He was put in the infantry and sent over to Italy and was killed a couple of weeks before the end of the war. So by joining the Army Air Core, they had so many enlistees that I didn't get called up until November of 1944, and I went to Fort Dix in New Jersey, and then Keestler Field, Mississippi for basic training. Then I went to Emeril, Texas for airplane mechanic training. They didn't need pilots or navigators or any officers training, so they dumped us all in airplane mechanic school and the war ended in Germany in May of '45, in Japan of August '45, and luckily I didn't see any action. But I did get sent overseas to Germany in this Army of Occupation after airplane mechanic school but I never worked on an airplane afterwards, which was typical of the army. After Emeril, Texas I was sent to Long Beach, California for specializing in the Douglas A 26 attack bomber and my mechanics training and Long Beach, California was a wonderful place to be stationed. And I spent my weekends in Hollywood, Santa Monica area most of the time. It was a great place to be stationed, just wonderful. And in fact I was there on VEJ day in August of '45 when the United States went crazy because the war was over. And with Japan- it ended abruptly with the atomic bombs and so they released us from base for the day and we went to Hollywood and what a riot. We kissed all the girls in town...

Tim Crow- What a good day to be in uniform.

May- Yes it was really wonderful.

Crow- And what made you choose the army? Is there a reason you chose the army over other branches of service or is that just what presented itself to you at the time?

May- Well like many guys I wanted to become a pilot to fly. And it was either the Army Air Core or the Navy. I chose the Army Air Core because a good friend of mine, Dave Gunster had signed up for the Army Air Core too, so uh, you know I liked the uniforms better than the Navy- that was part of it!

Crow- At 18, that is very important.

May- The Navy Uniforms had no pockets.

Crow- And the Navy had a lot of different uniforms they had to wear, as it was explained to me. And Hollywood sounds like a great place to be.

May- Oh yeah, that was a great place to be stationed.

Crow- So it was after that when you were shipped overseas.

May- My friend Dave Gunster was stationed in Santa Monica so we would get together on weekends. And then after a while I was sent back East to Shinoot Field, Illinois and then down to Greensboro, North Carolina and my friend Dave Gunster had the same reporting date down there as I did. And we both ended up reporting together and we were able to stay together after that so it couldn't be better to have my best friend with me going overseas at the Army of Occupation in Germany and we also managed to room together. The German barracks had two man rooms. And we had one that had a lot of cracks on the wall because it had been bombed by the Americans. We went to the PX and got scraps of magazine and covered the walls with pin-ups. That's a picture I should show you. I guess I forgot to bring them.

Crow- You'll find them. They're probably underneath your glasses.

May- But anyway, it was great to be with your best friend and we had a great time together even over in Germany. And then I was able to get the Swiss Rome tour. My friend Dave couldn't but I took two other guys from the base and we went to Switzerland, a beautiful city on a lake, a huge lake, with steamers, and then down to Rome, Italy. We stayed at a resort area Mussolini had built, and we toured Rome. It was so interesting with the old ruins, like the Forum and the Colosseum. And back up in Switzerland we stayed at Lake Lago, another beautiful lake. And by the time I got back to the base they were closing the base, and they sent me home! So I was able to get that wonderful trip in before I came home. And that was certainly a high point of my army career- was to go on that Swiss Rome tour.

Crow- How long did that tour last?

May- The tour was only about eleven days.

Crow- That's fantastic. And you said for twenty dollars?

May- For twenty dollars is what the army charged. For room and board and transportation. You couldn't beat that. But yes I would say that was such a lucky break. Particularly when I hadn't been over there long enough to get the tour, the Captain decided to let me go.

Crow- Good behavior I guess. You must have been somebody's favorite, who knows. That's fantastic. And while you were over there you drove a mail truck? Your primary duties while you were over there were what?

May- Well when I went to Germany- I was just training in the United States basically- but when I went to Germany I was assigned a mail route with a jeep. I would take official mail from the base at Hanau to Frankfurt, to the IG Building. And the cities in Germany were in ruins because they were so heavily bombed during the war. But the small towns were beautiful, villages untouched, and they looked like they did in the Middle Ages. It was a great place to be stationed though, but I was only there for about five months. I had enough points to be discharged and so they sent me home and I was discharged in mid-August of 1945. I was in 21 months, altogether. 1946, excuse me- It was 1946 not 1945. Did I give you the right?

Crow- I'm looking. Yes you did. August of '46. What was your training like, state-side, before you went to Germany?

May- Oh, alright. Basic training in Keestler, Mississippi which is right on the Gulf, in a resort area, but I was there in December and January and it was cold and damp, terrible. And then from there I went to Emeril, Texas for training as an airplane mechanic. I had originally enlisted hoping to get pilot training, and become an officer, but they had so many enlistees that they took a long time to call me up and they didn't know what to do with us all once they got us. So the easiest thing was to give us airplane mechanic training and then the war ended after they sent me to California to specialize in the Douglas A 26 and the war ended when I was out there. And what a wonderful celebration but I guess I mentioned that already.

Crow- What kind of plane was the A 26? Was that a bomber?

May- The A 26 was an attack bomber. It was a two engine and it came in two versions, either a greenhouse in the front or they just had four or six 50-caliber machine guns mounted in the front for strafing.

Crow- So you said the army trained you to fly these planes but you never actually flew the plane? Was there any rigorous basic army training that everybody has to go through?

May- No I never did. And oh well our basic training which I had at Keestler Field was a lot of calisthenics and long hikes, but nothing as bad as the infantry, certainly. It was still shorter and less physical training than the infantry would have been.

Crow- And at that time, that was already on its decline anyway because the war was over.

May- The war was winding down.

Crow- So out of 21 months of your service how much of that was abroad?

May- 5 months.

Crow- Okay, so that was quick. I can see why that Swiss-Rome excursion was a definite highlight.

May- Oh yes. That was certainly a wonderful trip. I was so happy to be able to take that, since I wasn't even over there long enough to be eligible. They let me go anyway.

Crow- That's perfect. So you came back from there, and when were you released? Shortly thereafter?

May- Oh yes. When I came back I went to- uh, oh gosh, here in Jersey- I have forgotten the name right now, but I was only back here for at the most a week. And I was discharged. I went by boat- by ship I should say. Our victory ship is what went over to France and then by train into Germany. And then I came back through Bremerhaven, Germany, on- I can't remember the name of the ship, but the other was a freighter to carry troops but the one coming back was actually an ocean-liner for passengers. And that was a much nicer trip, it was faster too. I forget how many days it took going over.

Crow- So when you went over, you were on the victory ship, and that's how you got to Germany while you were still commissioned? Or you were decommissioned then you went back? I just want to make sure I am following this correctly.

May- No, I wasn't commissioned. So I went over in November of 1945, and came back in May of '46. I was discharged a few days after I got back. I got home the same day as my brother, who had gone to the Pacific and he had gone in before I did. He was older than me and he had gotten a commission and he became an officer. It was one lucky day for my folks and for us to be discharged and to arrive home the same day within an hour of each other. In fact we met at my father's office in New York City and came home on the train with him. We arrived within an hour of each other at his office. So that was one happy day- August 16th, 1946.

Crow- That's hard to believe- one coming from the Pacific, one coming from Europe, two different paths. Older brother? Younger brother?

May- Older brother. He was in the Philippines, he was sent to the Philippines after he got his commission.

Crow- When did he go? Did he go before you?

May- Yes he went in before me. He went in June or July of '44. He was older but he was getting deferments because he was going to engineering school at Stevens Tech. And so once he graduated, he got a commission as an ensign and I just came out of high school, and went in.

Crow- Right. And so did he see any combat, or it was right on the edge of all that? Basically were you worried about his situation being in the Pacific?

May- No. The war was winding down. He was on a ship in Manila Bay for a while. I think it was a landing craft. One of the big landing craft tanks. Landing ship tank LST. It had the big doors.

Crow- Yeah that is amazing. That story of you coming together of him within an hour of each other at your dad's office and then driving home and mom's waiting there....

May- Yeah yeah and we came home with my dad, but my mom met us at the train and oh what a happy time that was.

Crow- That's just extraordinary.

May- Yup, we were both discharged, and arrived home within an hour of each other. That is an odd coincidence.

Crow- That is tremendous. I mean, it's absolutely beautiful. So, that is to an extent behind you now so what did you – what's your first move after 21 months in the army? What did you do as a civilian after that?

May- Well I didn't know what to do! I did want to go to college, but I came home too late to get into any school that fall. So I just did some odd jobs selling, and then I decided that I wanted to go in- I had some artistic ability- and I wanted to go into industrial design which was product design, more from the styling end than the engineering, but I ended up doing a lot of engineering too. But anyway I went to Rhode Island School of Design for four years.

Crow- That's extraordinary. That's a very strong school.

May- Yes it was a good school, and then I – my brother and I were always very close, even though we were 2.5 years apart in age and 3 years in school- he got me a job in Beckden Dickinson which made medical instruments in Rutherford, NJ. They really couldn't use my industrial design skills to their advantage there. I stayed there for three years before I finally decided that I should get something more along my line. And so then I worked for a small design outfit in Maplewood, NJ then after that.

Crow- What was that called?

May- It was called Gershin Industrial Design. G-e-r-s-h-i-n. Or e-n, it might have been e-n. And that was product design, more in-line with my training, yes.

Crow- So did you stick with that product design throughout your professional career?

May- Yes I did product design throughout my forty years.

Crow- Is there anything out there that people might recognize that you had a hand in?

May- Probably not much that is in production now, if anything. I did a child's booster seat- it was rotationally molded all in one piece. And that was quite an innovation because before that they had just been fabricated out of wood and vinyl and this was all one hollow, plastic part made by rotational casting. And I did, uh, oh god, I am drawing a blank!

Crow- Well that's fine. I know that's what I do, I do a lot of commercials, I just lend my voice to commercials and products and people ask me, "Oh, where have we heard you? Which ads are you in?" And I am in plenty of ads, but I can't remember them! But more on the nature of the work. Once the end product is out there, I am already onto the next thing. It's kind of like okay that one's been released, that one's gone off, and I am here now, I'm not there. So you drawing a blank- that's not a bad memory, that's just a nature of the mindset.

May- Along the way I worked for a company, Wheel Products, and I designed a lot of wheels for off-road equipment like lawnmowers, go karts, and wagons and stuff like that. So I ended up designing many, many wheels. It was more for aesthetic reasons.

Crow- Okay. Is there anything we didn't cover regarding your time in the army, either state-side or abroad, that you want to add? If you covered it all, perfect. Then I want to talk to you more about this design stuff. Anything else? Anything that comes to mind? Like you mentioned that incredibly great trip

to Rome and Switzerland... anything else that ever happened along your mail routes, people you met along the way, any occurrence out of the ordinary? I mean you were only there five months.

May- No but I did have a pretty good job, driving a jeep, driving mail I must say. And luckily, there had been some problems before. They said never drive the jeep with the windshield down, because some of the Germans underground during the war were stringing wire across the roads to possibly decapitate you if you didn't have your windshield up. Or even if you did I guess there was a possibility, but luckily I didn't have any problems with that. I didn't have any problems with German youth or anything while I was there. See I was there the second year of occupation, so some of the problems occurred the first year. But everything was pretty calm, luckily, when I was there.

Crow- I just wanted to make sure we didn't miss anything. That's what I was thinking- I was thinking landmines or booby traps, that kind of stuff. Yeah, you did have to be aware of these things but they weren't an issue. That's great. This concludes this portion of the interview, thank you Joe, and we'll sign off there.

Transcribed by Caroline Hoffman