

**Harold S. Cottrell  
Veteran**

**Leonard, Philip  
Interviewer**

**Louis Miller Museum  
Hoosick Falls Historical Society  
Hoosick Falls, NY**

**Date of Interview  
Not stated**

Q: We are at the Louis Miller Museum and we are interviewing people as part of our military series. Would you please state your name?

A: Harold S. Cottrell.

Q: Where do you live Harold?

A: I live in Fox Hollow.

Q: In Fox Hollow. OK. Would you tell us a little about where you are from and so forth.

A: I lived in Johnsonville. Born in the (unclear) hospital. Then my family moved away. We moved down to Westchester. Peekskill, New York. I went to school there in the public school and I graduated from Peekskill High School in 1939. I think our governor graduated from there.

Q: Yeah, from Peekskill. Right.

A: It's funny. He wasn't born yet (laughs). I worked doing landscaping. Some caddying at (unclear) Golf Course. Then I went to work in a defense plant over in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Bridgeport Brass. We made shell casings for mostly the navy - 105's some 120mm's.

About that time, my brother got drafted into the service. I couldn't see him going and me staying home. So, I enlisted at West Point thinking air force they had started there. We were there for about fifteen days taking basic training. They started up Stewart field and they sent us all up there. They started bringing...

Q: That's in Newburgh?

A: Right. That's in Newburgh. That's one of the largest fields in the east I guess. Its a big place. They did an awful lot of work. When I went there it was about the size of the Bennington airport. They took a couple of mountains down like Mt. Anthony and leveled it all out and they filled it up with airplanes. We trained there with primary trainers, basic and advanced training for West Point cadets.

I was there from June of '42 to July of '43. Then I shipped out to aerial gunnery school in Tyndall Field, Florida. I spent...

Q: Can I just interrupt you. What did you do at Stewart Field? What was your job?

A: I trained as a mechanic and wound up as a crew chief on two AT6's- that's single engine advanced trainers.

Q: So, you kept them flying so they could keep training people.

A: We did all the maintenance.

Q: OK, I'm sorry. Go on. So what did you do then? You became a gunner.

A: They were looking for volunteers. The air force flying crew were all volunteers. Nobody was drafted in - pilot, co-pilot, whatever you did. I think it was September when I left Tyndall Field. We went to Salt Lake City replacement depot. That's where they made up bomb crews.

They sent a bunch of us down to the 400th Bomb Group in Alamogordo, New Mexico. We started to train there for the Philippines or some place. But, all of the sudden they changed their mind and took the whole 400th Bomb Group and moved it to South Carolina - an air base in Charleston. There was nobody there. We finished our aerial training by flying anti-sub patrol anywhere down to the Bahamas islands all through the South Atlantic.

Then one day we got our orders and we went to Mitchel Field, Long Island. We were there longer than we normally had been. We picked up a brand new B-24, a four engine bomber.

We opened the orders, according to the law, twelve miles outside the United States. We were headed for Italy. It took us quite while. We flew the southern route all the way down to Fortaleza. That's in Brazil, I guess. There we took off and we flew across the Atlantic and landed in Dakar, Africa. We spent two or three days there. I can't remember the name of the big pass there. The big mountain. Anyway, it was fogged in.

That first morning that they told us to take off. The first plane that took off went out and BOOM, blew up. They sent another one up. It blew up. Then, they grounded everything. They had sabotaged those planes.

Q: Somebody sabotaged the planes?

A: Who? I don't know. We weren't there too long after that. In a few hours, they finished checking the planes and we took off.

Q: What was your job on the B-24?

A: I was an aerial engineer and aerial gunner. I flew as a gunner most of the time.

Q: Were what they called a "flight engineer"?

A: Yes. Basically, all you did was transfer fuel from tank to tank because you get an engine that something happens to it - maybe catch on fire - you'd have to feather it, put it out, take and shut that tank off and transfer it to another engine.

(cross talk, unclear)

A: Anyway, we flew to Marrakesh, Africa. The next day we flew to (unclear). That night, in the middle of the night they got us up and we flew and we dropped - I didn't think they were bombs because I didn't see anything blow up - but we dropped something and the next thing I know we landed in the field of the 484th Bomb Group in Italy.

We slept out on the ground in the snow. They probably didn't know we were coming. We ate Spam. They had Spam cans like that. That's all we had to eat. But they took the plane from us and they shipped us up north to Foggia.

There was a B-17 outfit up there. The 97th Bomb Group. That were the only one in Italy. All the rest were medium or heavy bombers. Then, we started to fly missions.

The first mission we flew was the Ploesti Oil Fields. It was one of the worst places that you could fly. It was about an eleven hour mission from where we were. They split our crew up. My pilot and tail gunner were flying off my right wing. We had another gunner in another plane. We saw the pilot's plane go down and that's the last we heard from it. The other fella who was in our crew, they went down too. You couldn't believe that you could fly through that flak. You couldn't believe it.

Q: Where were the oil fields? Romania?

A: Ploesti. That was in the southern Balkans. They thought a lot of those oil fields. They had about 260 anti-aircraft guns.

When we were going to school, we had an officer with a bunch of shells - we went to the interrogation. He said you can fly as long as you want to or as high as you want to. They'll still hit you. (unclear) 255mm anti-aircraft.

Q: The gunner, which one were you. They had four or five gun places.

A: (cross talk) was the Top turret. I flew one mission in the Sperry Ball turret. I have claustrophobia, so I didn't go back down there.

Q: I see. But the flight engineer was usually up in the upper one.

A: I flew the waist gun a lot.

Q: I see.

A: We had old planes. No blisters. They were open. Cold. Forty five, fifty below zero. We used to carry bobby pins. Our gloves plugged into our shirts or our jackets. If something happened to the glove, you'd take it and short them across so the rest of the suit would work.

Q: What year was this when you were in Italy flying these things?

A: 1944.

Q: In 1944.

A: We started flying in February, 1944.

Q: I see.

A: Well, we flew over four or five different targets in, Bucharest, Budapest, Austria, some parts of Yugoslavia and Italy. I went as far as the Toulon sub pens. That was Toulon, France. That was in southern France.

I made another trip over Ploesti oil fields. We lost two engines and we're talking five hours from our base. We flew and we got over the Bora (sp?) mines which are in Yugoslavia. They're near where they're having all the trouble with the Moslems there. We stayed away from them. They'd cut your finger off if you had a ring on if they thought it was a Masonic ring or something.

Anyway, two planes came at us. When they got close enough, We could see what they were. They were P-38's. P-38's were a twin engine. They could fly on one engine. They were flying on one engine. They took us to the coast. Then we threw everything out, all the guns and everything went into the Adriatic Sea. We were only maybe three hundred fifty, four hundred feet above the water. We only had those two engines and they were pretty well beat.

As we got near the coastline buried in the air currents, we started picking right up. The pilot said get your guns out, Very guns and shooting flares. We shot everything we had. All we did was make a little loop and we landed. If anybody had been in the way, we would have landed on top of them.

Q: There was an airfield right near Bari.

A: That was Air Force headquarters.

Q: We had a fella in town that loaded the bombs on those planes outside of Bari.

A: Around Bari?

Q: Yes, Ted Lucas his name is. He told me the story.

A: What was his name?

Q: Ted Lucas. He was there right from the beginning when they started building that field at Bari. Alright, so you're coming in now and you landed on that airfield near Bari.

A: We landed there and they put us up for the night. The next day, they took us to Air Force headquarters and interrogated us. We met Major General Twining. He was in charge of the 15th Air Force that took care of all of the heavy bombers.

When I flew the twenty first mission, I flew over Austria. In Austria, they have a giant hedgerow. Did you ever hear of it? The largest hedgerow in the world.

Q: Its in Vienna. Yeah, I've been there. Its at (unclear).

A: We could see it. We were up about twenty eight, twenty nine thousand feet. We made a (unclear) to the right. It was probably four hundred bombers all together. Of course, the fighters never went through flak. (unclear). We lost an engine before we ever hit a target.

We were heading for a Messerschmitt plant and that was how many miles I don't know, maybe fifty miles. But, we followed that hedgerow. More or less, you'd think it was a guide. We dropped our bombs and did a (unclear) to the right and headed back towards Yugoslavia. We lost another engine. We got probably twenty minutes past Zagreb, Yugoslavia and the pilot says I think we are going to bail out.

I got hit in the arm and the leg. The radio man, he got hit right across the stomach. It was just like somebody took a knife and opened him up. We didn't have any doctors. We patched him up with everything we had and gave him a couple of shots of morphine and threw him out.

The first four that went out we never saw again. The rest of us got together in the next three or four days, a week, I don't know.

Q: But you all bailed out. Of course, you landed in different places.

A: Six of us got back together. They had me interred. The best I can remember maybe two or three days. When I came down, my chute caught on a tree. I couldn't control. When I went down I banged the tree, the side of myself. I still have trouble with it. I broke my ear. It probably knocked me out.

When I came to, I didn't know where I was. I saw a little boy running. There was a road. The next thing I knew there was a bunch who came out. They had uniforms on, German uniforms on. They took me in and asked about a thousand questions but all you give them is one thing: your name, rank and serial number.

They had a radio there. I could hear it. They had me in a room. But, the funny thing was, I carried my 45 here in my arm (points under his arm pit). My arm was in a sling. They never searched me. Actually, if you stop think about it to fight a war. The only reason we had those

was if you were hit so bad and couldn't do anything and you didn't want to jump out, you used them for yourself.

I kept mine. I gave it to a fella that I knew in Yugoslavia - a partisan. I gave it to him before I got on the plane. The English flew us out eventually.

Q: You were captured then and what did these fellas do? You heard the radio.

A: We were combined there for a period of time and then, one day, we heard a lot of shooting and two big girls they had German burp guns. They came in and pretty soon we were gone. They took us right out of there but they were Marshall Tito's Partisans. So then we were pretty well set. We had a certain amount of protection all of the time. That was May 24th. I can always remember that. (unclear) was somewhere around that.

Q: Who flew you out?

A: The English. (unclear) Dakotas. (unclear). You wouldn't think they could fly a plane where they flew it because when they came in they were brushing the trees. They couldn't get their wheels up. The wheels were running on the top of the trees when they flew us out.

They took twenty nine of us out of there (unclear, crosstalk) We started out with five or six during that period of time. That's how many guys were shot down.

Q: So, Tito's Partisans, they came and found the pilots and brought them back.

A: They took care of communications and trying to get us something to eat. I didn't have shoes. They were like slippers or felt. They were heated. I had my shoes. I tied them on my belt but when I went through the hatch to bail out it probably caught and ripped them off.

It was about a month before they finally dropped some food and I got some clothes to wear and a pair of shoes. We walked and we walked and there's a place called (unclear) plain. You'd think you were out in some part of Arizona. It was a big flat area and had all rock ledges around it.

On the south end of it, they had a landing strip. They took and they put carbide lights. When it started to get dark, they lit all of those. We could hear a plane and never saw it. In the meantime, we could hear a lot of shooting. They said we got to get out of there. The Germans got wise to what we were doing. They were moving in.

Actually, this was pretty close to the Dalmatian Alps and we started walking again. We were dead tired. We started walking. We walked until the next morning. We walked all night long. We got way up in the mountain. It was a little camp there. There was an American Lieutenant. There was an English - at least he said he was English - but he was Churchill, Major Churchill's son. He was a liaison officer. They gave us food - a little.

Q: And where was this? In Yugoslavia?

A: Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia ran over the mountain and right down into the Adriatic. How high the Dalmatian Alps are, I don't know. There's trees there that two or three of us couldn't reach around.

Q: Let me ask you this. You said they flew you out.

A: They flew us back to Italy.

Q: I see. But when you did the walk, this is before they flew you out. This is how you got to the plane.

A: That's how you got back. We had to walk to find the field.

Q: I see. To get the plane to go out.

A: They came in and flew us out. They took twenty nine....

Q: How long did it take you, you think between the time you were shot down and the time you got on a plane. How long do you think you were down?

A: Probably about seven weeks.

Q: Seven weeks. And you were hurt too. Did that heal up?

A: They had some homemade wine or something that they poured on it. Oh, my arm was puffed up. There's still a piece of shrapnel there but its right near that nerve. They wouldn't touch it.

Q: They flew you back to Italy?

A: Back down to Bari. We went there again. We went back in and saw the general and all his lieutenants. They interrogated us about everything under the sun.

Then they could ship us back. It took us about three hours for us to get back to Foggia. They put us on a 4x4. It was dark, not the field but our encampment was all lit up. We had an olive orchard, four trees, (unclear) put a pyramid tent in and that was our encampment.

My copilot was there and he came out and handed me a bottle of rum. We took a little with us when we went over but I took one drink out of that and I thought I'd die. I said no way and then asked why all the lights were on. He said, "Well, we had a new commanding officer. He was out of West Point and he had us dressing up in Class A's to go to that lousy mess hall to eat. We didn't enjoy that. He got shot down today. We're celebrating." I got a kick out of that.

Q: You got back. Did that put you up again? Did you fly again? (Mr. Cottrell shakes his head no). No, I didn't think so.

A: There was a tech order. I got to know tech orders. If I could find some army tech orders, I could pick it out. You are to be sent back to the continental US for a period of six months and then shipped to another theatre of operation. Because you spent that much time in enemy occupied country, you could be classified as a spy if they caught you again. They had me listed as a Prisoner of War and everything else. (unclear) tech order.

Q: So, you came back to the states?

A: After.. they eventually shipped us up to Bari Field and we were there for about nine or ten days. They put us on a ship as guards. We brought 1800 German prisoners back. That was in September of 1944. We got in the North Atlantic and you know those hurricanes that you hear about?

Q: Did you hit one?

A: Boy, I was in A-Deck and that's right up on the bow. I thought it was the anchor but it was the waves. We had a destroyer escort. You couldn't see them half the time. It was so rough. They were almost like submarines. I said I don't think I care about that.

Q: So, then you hit the states.

A: We hit the states. Dock 6, I think. Have you ever been down to the docks in New York?

Q: Yeah.

A: I think it was 6. There's some kind of encampment up the Hudson a little way. They were going to give us a big steak dinner. We finally got up there. It was dark and it was so far away from where the mess hall was I said, "you got a place to sleep?" I went to sleep.

I did put in a call to Peekskill. That was only...

Q: Not too far.

A: Like calling Albany or something. The operator said, "Is that you Tuffy?". They always called me "Tuffy". It was my sister in law. She was a telephone operator.

Q: What a coincidence.

A: She couldn't get a hold of my mother or my sister. She let them know.

Q: That you were back in the states.

A: The next day, I got some clean clothes and what have you. I got a train from New York Central up to Peekskill. One of the taxi cab drivers drove me out to the farm. Then I went to a rehabilitation hospital in Fort Logan, Colorado. I spent the winter out there. Then they shipped me back to Texas in, let' see, the north part of Texas, Perrin Field.



We had a fellow from Hoosick Falls area who was stationed there. In fact, he was killed down there. I'll think of his name. His father's still living. I don't know about his brother. His father still lives down on Potter Hill.

I stayed there. I was supposed to be given a choice under that tech order I told you about. They finally gave it to me. I went to Stewart Field. I had a fancy belt buckle. Of course, now I'm new there as far as that goes it had all changed from when I left there. I guess he would have been my commanding office. He said, "Soldier, you're out of uniform that buckle is not GI" I said, "Yes, sir." I looked up and he had his insignia crossed on his collars. I said, "Sir, you insignia is not on right." Oh, my god, that was the worst thing I could have ever said.

But I was trained as a base tech inspector. I inspected airplanes and all installations and everything. I said I better do something so I went to the post Adjutant General. They are lawyers. I talked with him. He took down everything. He got my record out and said, "You know, you've got enough points. I could discharge you." I thought maybe that's the best thing and if I decide I want to go back I could reenlist but it won't be back where he is (laughs).

So, I went home and I went to work for a short time at Bridgeport Brass. I had to have an operation. I went to the VA but they wouldn't do anything. So, I had to find a surgeon that didn't need too much money. My wife had insurance which covered the hospital but I got an operation down in Poughkeepsie, Bassett Hospital.

I couldn't do anything, so I came up to Hoosick Falls. You know Bud Stevens? He was my uncle. I stayed with him. In the meantime, on Wilson Hill Road, the farm right there, Wilsons. My brother married a Wilson, Norma Wilson. Her aunt was there and she didn't want to be there all alone. She wanted to sell it and I wound up buying it.

Q: I see. So how long have you lived in Hoosick Falls? When did you buy it?

A: I bought that in 1946.

Q: Oh, you've been here quite awhile then.

A: Oh yes.

Q: You've been here a long time. That's fifty some years.

A: I stayed over there seventeen years and then I had a fire. The barn burned. I bought Tilly's farm in Hoosick. I had a son. I don't know if you were in school or not. He got shot - Jimmy.

Q: Yes, I remember. Sure.

A: I couldn't take it. I had to do something different. So, I (unclear) a place over in Fox Hollow. We had a lot of trouble. Finally, we took Jimmy out to Institute (unclear) Wichita, Kansas. He spent four years out there but they got him so he could write left handed and so he could talk.

Q: I think I saw him in Bennington. (cross talk) When I was superintendent over in Bennington. I think I met him a couple times.

A: He's lives up there. He works where I used to work.

Q: I've seen him. I know I've talked to him. How many children did you have?

A: Seven.

Q: Seven children. Boy, the guys came back from the wars and sure had children Everybody I interview had five, six, seven.

A: You maybe knew some of my daughters, Susan, Jean, Karen. Susan's a teacher. Karen's a teacher down in Texas. Susan's in Louisiana. She won't teach though. She says if I can't tell them what to do and they don't want to listen, I don't want to teach them,

Q: So (unclear), you've lived here since '46.

A: I've been here since '46. When I quit farming, I went to work for Union Carbide up in Bennington making watch batteries and hearing aid batteries until 1986. I said I might as well retire. I raised a few beef cows.

Q: Hey, that's fine. That's a great story. We thank you very much for coming. We appreciate hearing the story. We've got it on tape.