

James G. Bangert, Narrator

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INT: Sir, for the record would you state your full name and date and place of birth, please.

JB: James Bangert, born in Riverdale, New York City, June 25, 1924.

INT: Did you attend school there?

JB: Yes, I did. I went to parochial school and then I went to Manhattan College Prep and then I went to Manhattan College for six months.

INT: What year did you graduate from high school?

JB: 1943.

INT: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

JB: I was home, it was Sunday afternoon, we had the radio on, I forgot what we were doing. We never knew what Pearl Harbor was or where it was, we were very surprised to hear about it, shocked in fact.

INT: Did your life change at that point?

JB: Not really, I think I was only 16 at the time.

INT: Did your family experience shortages or rationing?

JB: Sure, during the war it was hard to get food, hard to get butter, fuel was rationed, gasoline. When I graduated from high school in '43, we wanted to go on vacation but couldn't get any gas. We went up to the Adirondacks and my dad, we took the boat ride up to Albany, my dad rented an [?] up to Schroon Lake and that's where I registered for the draft. I was just 18 at that time.

INT: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

JB: I was drafted.

INT: You ended up in the Army Air Corps, how did that happen?

JB: Just by coincidence. I was drafted into the Army and I was on the train down to Fort Dix and all of a sudden an officer walked through the train and he had an Air Corps patch on and all of the fellas in the train started to cheer. I didn't know what they were cheering about and finally I realized the Air Force. I didn't matter to me [which branch of service]. The only thing that mattered, when we went through induction, they were going to put me in the Navy and for some reason, I didn't want to be in the Navy. I can't explain why. I just didn't like the uniform, I was 16, what did I know? I was complaining to the officer who was a dentist and was examining my teeth and he said, "You don't want to be in the Navy? Well, your teeth are bad. You're going to go in the Army." That's how I got in the Army. [laughs]

INT: Did you go to Fort Dix for your basic training?

JB: Yes. From there we went down to Miami Beach, took our basic training down in Miami Beach, and then I was going to be on ground crew, trained to be a mechanic down in Gulfport. My older brother, who was six years older than I was, he had gone in a year before Pearl Harbor – he could see the war was going to come and decided to volunteer – he was an officer by that time, he was in the Air Force.

INT: Was he a pilot?

JB: No, he washed out of that. First he was in the Army, training in an armored division and he decided he wanted to get in the Air Force. He washed out of pilot school but he got into bombardier school and became a bombardier. He said, "As long as you're going to fly, why don't you become an officer, train to be a bombardier or a pilot?" I didn't make it to pilot and I didn't make it to navigator but I made it to bombardier.

INT: Did you go to flight training?

JB: No, I went right to bombardier school. I almost finished the course in mechanics but just before graduation, they picked me up for bombardier school.

INT: Where did you go for bombardier school?

JB: First we went to San Antonio and went through a series of tests and they decided whether you were going to be a pilot, a navigator, or a bombardier and I was assigned to be a bombardier from there. Then I went to Childress Air Force Base in Texas for bombardier training.

INT: How long was that training?

JB: I guess it was about four or five months.

INT: You were injured?

JB: Yes, we had to load our own bombs, 100 pound bombs, it took two of us, and I happened to cut my wrist on the tail of the disposable training bomb. They were cheap bombs and they had very crude tails on them. I didn't know it, but they were very sharp and I caught my wrist on the tail. The officer on the plane says, "Somebody's bleeding here." I looked down and sure enough I was bleeding. I had to go to the hospital and they operated on my wrist. I still can't move my pinkie to the full extent.

INT: When did you graduate from bombardier school?

JB: I think it was in July or August of 1944. Then I went to Tampa, Florida and picked up a crew down there and trained with that crew until November or December. That crew, my original crew, left for England and I was left behind. I don't know why. I picked up a new crew and trained with that crew. For some reason they had too many bombardiers. I found that out later on, I didn't fly every mission with my crew even overseas.

INT: When did you go overseas?

JB: February 1945, almost at the end of the war.

INT: Did you fly?

JB: We left from Hunter Field in Georgia and flew into Bangor, Maine. There was a blizzard in New England at the time. We were supposed to go to another field but we ended up in Bangor then on to Labrador, Greenland, Iceland, and then into Scotland.

INT: Did you drop that plane off there?

JB: Yes, we left the plane behind. In fact when we left the plane was still there, it never saw combat.

INT: So you ended up going to England?

JB: We landed in Wales and then they took us to England.

INT: With the Eighth Air Force? What unit did they put you in?

JB: Right, the Eighth Air Force, the 452d in Deopham Green, near Attleborough.

INT: Had you heard about the Eighth Air Force before?

JB: Not really, I heard about the Ninth because my brother was in the Ninth. He was in the invasion actually.

INT: Once you got assigned to the Eighth Air Force, did you have one plane that you flew on most of the time?

JB: No. The plane we flew over on was never used, we didn't fly the same plane every day, and I didn't fly with the crew all the time, sometimes I flew with different crews.

INT: What was your first mission like?

JB: My first crew, I didn't go on their mission and they were seriously damaged. Their plane burned up on the runway and luckily they all got out of the plane. One guy jumped out of the back as they were going down the runway, he was seriously injured and he ended up in the hospital. The second mission that the crew flew, I went with them and we went deep into Germany, south of Berlin on the border of Czechoslovakia and Germany. We were hit with twin-engine German jets. Our number three engine was damaged; we had to feather that engine. The fact is, they couldn't find the target, we didn't even zero in on the target.

INT: They just told you when to drop the bombs?

JB: It was even easier than that. It was all automatic. We dropped the bombs off the lead plane's instructions. All we had to do was open the bomb bays, turn a switch on, and it was all radio controlled. All the bombs went out about the same time. The plane was damaged so we went on to the second target. In fact our bomb bay doors wouldn't open, we had to crank them down. It was very confusing with the jets coming through; I saw one plane shot down, the tail disintegrated and they spiraled it down. I didn't see anybody get out of the plane but I guess they did, I don't know. That was my first mission, kind of scary.

INT: How many missions did you fly?

JB: Seven combat missions and the last few missions we were dropping food to the Dutch. They were starving, the Germans had them trapped, and they couldn't get any food into Holland. The Red Cross, they had a truce, we flew into Holland at very low altitude, something like 300 feet, just off the ground. The bomb bays were loaded with canned foods, bags of flour, on plywood platforms. We opened the bomb bays and those platforms were released and everything went out all at one time on to a racetrack. There were two other drops, I think there were four missions altogether dropping food, I was on three of them.

INT: Your other combat missions?

JB: One of them was kind of rough into the Ruhr Valley. We flew into Germany and all of a sudden made more than a 90 degree turn and flew up the Ruhr Valley trying to burst a dam in the Ruhr Valley. The flak was very heavy. As soon as we dropped the bombs we made a left turn and they just followed us around with flak. They never hit us, but it was right in front of us, all the way around.

INT: Were any of your crewmen injured on any of the flights?

JB: No, just that one crewman that jumped out of the plane while it was running down the runway. He got panicky and the plane didn't stop, it was on fire. He pushed one of the gunners out ahead of him and that fella wasn't hurt at all. He must have just relaxed and tumbled. The other guy jumped out and he was badly damaged, injured, ended up in the hospital.

INT: What about your daily life at that point? The war was kind of winding down.

JB: We didn't really know that. We finally heard that Hitler died. We picked up the German radio through I think it was Ireland and they played some very sad music when Hitler died. We all cheered when we found out. [laughs]

INT: What was it like when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt? Was that pretty sad?

JB: I don't remember; I knew he died.

INT: That was in April and of course the war ended in May in Europe. Was there a lot of celebration going on at that point?

JB: Not on our base, we were very quiet. On some of the bases, we were out in the farm country, and they were igniting the stacks of hay, but it was very quiet on our base. I remember they shot off some flares but that was about it.

INT: What did you do during your time off?

JB: We had a pretty nice time, we had bicycles and we used to ride in the country. England was beautiful, churchyards just like I remember from my English history book, pictures of churches and country churches, then we went to London once, Piccadilly. It was very dark.

INT: That must have been fun.

JB: It wasn't. There were girls all around but we didn't bother with them. They were prostitutes working, Piccadilly commandoes we called them.

INT: Now what about the people around your base? How did you get along with the English population?

JB: We were right next to a farm, there was a hedgerow and then the farm was behind it. A little boy would come over to visit us, his mother used to do our laundry. They'd pick up our laundry and bring it back and forth and we'd pay them. That's all I had to do with civilians except I went into town and bought a bicycle.

INT: Did you get to see any USO shows or any celebrities?

JB: When I was in training I saw Bob Hope down in Gulfport when I was training to be a mechanic. And Charlie Ruggles, I talked to him. He was a famous actor. He was an older

man and he had such heavy makeup that it looked like he had a clay face. He was a big movie star, I got his autograph. [laughs]

INT: When did they send you home?

JB: When the war ended we were waiting. There were rumors that we were going to retrain and go to Japan, or stay as army of occupation. Finally the end of June we flew home the same way we came over, by way of Iceland, Greenland, and Labrador.

INT: You didn't take that same airplane back home?

JB: No, we saw it in Scotland. [laughs]

INT: So you came home, you got a leave, how long had it been since you'd seen your family?

JB: I had seen them before I left overseas so it was only about six or seven months.

INT: Were you discharged at that point?

JB: We went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It was a redistribution center and they were talking about retraining us and sending us over to Japan but on our way out, the troop train stopped in Chicago. Some of the guys left the train and picked up the newspaper and it said the A-bomb dropped. We didn't know what an A-bomb was. Shortly after that, by the time we got to Sioux Falls, they dropped the second bomb and they didn't know what to do with us actually. I got right out after that. I got home in 1945 around August, just before college started. I had half a year of college before I went in so I was able to pick it up in September right away.

INT: So you took advantage of the GI Bill?

JB: Yes, I did.

INT: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

JB: Not then, but I did later on, the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

INT: How long have you been a member of the Eighth Air Force Historical Society?

JB: About three years. My youngest son is a major in the Air Force and he's got two more years to go and then he can retire. He said, "Dad, why don't you get involved?" I was involved in raising three kids, I raised a family. They were going to call me back into Korea. I was working for General Foods as a food scientist; I had a degree in Chemistry. They wanted to call me back into Korea and when I told General Foods, they wrote a letter. They said I was involved in civilian food distribution and they got me out.

INT: When you were discharged, what rank were you?

JB: Second lieutenant.

INT: Have you maintained contact with some of the people you were in service with?

JB: A couple of years ago I did. There were four bombardiers down in Tampa, Florida for training, we got to be very close friends; we went to a lot of places, went up to St. Petersburg. I lost track of them because they went overseas before I did. I was held back and my crew left me behind to pick up a new crew, so I lost contact with them, but three or four years ago, I picked up contact again. Since that time, two of them died; in fact I found out about three years ago that my whole crew had gone, they all passed away.

INT: Speaking of crew, you've got that photo if you can hold it up.

JB: [Shows photo of plane and crew, points to self.]

INT: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

JB: A great deal. I went in as a kid, a teenager and came out feeling like I was a big shot. I had much more experience, was more grown up. I went off to college and finished college.

INT: How was the GI Bill? Was it adequate?

JB: It was great. My brother and sister both went to night school to get their college and I got it handed to me. It was a great deal.

INT: When did you get married?

JB: In 1952. I met my wife at General Foods, she was a librarian in the lab where I worked and I got friendly with her. [laughs] She just passed away a few months ago.

INT: I'm sorry to hear that. And you had six children?

JB: Six children, six grandchildren, and a great grandchild, a great grandson.

INT: Thank you so much for your interview.

JB: Thank you, I appreciate it.