

**Paul A. Butkerei  
Veteran**

**Interviewed by: Wayne Clarke & Mike Russert  
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on 13 July 2005  
DMNA Headquarters,  
New York**

**Q:** This is an interview at the Division of Military Naval Affairs headquarters, Latham, New York. It's the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2005 approximately 10:40am. Interviewers are Wayne Clarke and Mike Russert. Could you give me your full name, date of birth?

**PB:** Paul A. Butkerei.

**Q:** What is your date of birth and place of birth please?

**PB:** 4/13/22. The place is a little town down on Long Island, East Rockaway. No relation to Rockaway.

**Q:** What was your educational background prior to entering service?

**PB:** I was at RPI. I wasn't doing great, typical and I had ten days' notice. I was going to be in the infantry. I quickly went down to New York, to Whitehall Street and enlisted.

**Q:** Before we talk about that, do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor? Where were you and how did you hear about that?

**PB:** I remember when I heard about Pearl Harbor, I was at RPI. It was a beautiful day. Boy, it was a shock.

**Q:** How did you hear about it?

**PB:** I don't have any recollection.

**Q:** So, you enlisted. Did you pick the Army Air Corps?

**PB:** Yes.

**Q:** Why?

**PB:** Because I thought it was a better service. I thought I'd do better there. I didn't want to be...my father...that's another story. My father escaped from Germany just before the war.

**Q:** Had you ever flown before?

**PB:** No. Occasionally. I'm not going to say I never did but I don't know when I did.

**Q:** Where did you go for your basic training?

**PB:** Basic training, Atlantic City.

**Q:** When did you enter the service?

**PB:** I entered the service (unclear) I don't know even know where I entered the service. The first thing I remember is being at Atlantic City. We were in one of those big hotels. All the stairs were covered with duckboard so we wouldn't destroy them. It was an experience but it wasn't like being out in the field.

**Q:** Where did you go after Atlantic City?

**PB:** I'm not sure anymore but I did end up in Nashville. They gave me a bunch of psycho motor tests and they checked off whether I could make a good pilot or how they could use me. My problem was that they got a hold of me and then they didn't know what to do with me.

Before I went to Nashville, I went to that school up in Vermont just below Barre. What the hell is the name of it?

**Q:** Norwich?

**PB:** Norwich. Yes. That was like going back to grade school.

**Q:** Why did they send you to Norwich?

**PB:** Because they didn't know what to do with me! They had air superiority and it was just on the tail end of the war. We established air superiority and our losses went plummeting and they had all these guys in the Army, in the Corps and they didn't know what to do with us. There was nobody being killed. So, that's the way it went.

**Q:** When you went to Nashville, where did they assign you?

**PB:** They said I would make a good bombardier or some other like navigator or something like that but they said I'd never make a pilot. I just didn't have it in me to do that. So, what do you think they did?

**Q:** I don't know. What?

**PB:** They sent me to pilot training!

**Q:** Where did you go for your pilot training?

**PB:** For the first part of it I went to, I was in that school up in Vermont. They had a couple of little planes, bi-planes. They took me up about three thousand feet (unclear) and I had a ball. It was fun but I never learned to land a plane. When I got down to the bottom, I stiffened up. That ground scared the hell out of me. So, what are you going to do? Then, I went to pilot training somewhere else, where did I go....Panama City, no...in Florida. Lakeland. Lakeland, Florida.

I was there about a month and they decided....they tried and tried and tried to make a pilot out of me to no avail because I had the same problem. Every time I got near the ground, I would freeze. It's too bad but that's the way it was.

Then they were mad at me because I hadn't performed so they sent me to Panama City for gunnery training. In gunnery training, I was really good at it. Then they decided that I was too smart to be a gunner so then they sent me to....

**Q:** Bombardier school? Did you go to bombardier school?

**PB:** No. They made a navigator out of me. I was good at that because I was kind of good at numbers. Then they assigned me to.....that was in Louisiana...Selman, Louisiana. Then from there I was assigned to a plane to be the navigator.

**Q:** That's where you were assigned a crew also?

**PB:** Yes.

**Q:** Where was that?

**PB:** I'm trying to remember where that was.

**Q:** Some of them picked up their planes in Nebraska, I believe.

**PB:** No, it was just a crew, no plane. So, anyway, they had one of these training (unclear) I don't know what they call it. I was in there with the pilot and the copilot. It was completely dark. I was supposed to navigate from here between two pylons here (points).

Here we go, we're going along. I said "estimated time of arrival" and the pilot never heard that term. He thought he had to change directions so he changed directions so we went north at an angle. We were going along.

I realized he made a mistake. I tried to figure out the time, what time to change direction. It was all estimated. Then I had to get a new bearing on that pylon. When we got upstairs or downstairs or whatever, the shortest route that we got it was a great big figure four that we made. I got right smack between those pylons. The pilot was so impressed, he thought I was god's give to earth. It was something. I really was good at it.

**Q:** Did you use the Norden bombsight?

**PB:** No, we didn't have that yet. Only the lead ship had that. Let me get ahead of the story.

We finally went overseas. We went over in a Liberty ship. Out of, I think it was Virginia. We went out of Virginia. We didn't know where they were going to send us. We ended up in Africa. In Oran. They left us off in Oran then took off for other.... they went back I guess to the states, you know.

Here we are in Oran for five days, maybe more. Our destination was Naples. The Army got a hold of an old banana boat. Oran was a banana source and they would ship bananas to France. Before they scuttled it, the Germans took all of the metal out of the

ship. The ship was going at a list of about 15 degrees. They had to keep hard left rudder to try to go straight.

Anyway, it took us five days to get to Naples. Then they decided that they didn't have room for us in Naples. They wanted us down in the foot. First we were in (unclear) then they wanted us down at the foot of Italy. They had an air base down there. That was the first that we ever got a hold of a ship. We got a ship there.

**Q:** Were you assigned the same plane all the time?

**PB:** No.

**Q:** Did you ever get to name one or paint one?

**PB:** We only had six missions. Then we were shot down. All that money that they spent on my education and the pilot's education, all down the drain.

That plane that we were flying had sixty seven holes in it from the day before. It was in bad shape. When we got over Vienna, some flak hit us and knocked out the hydraulic system. It hit #3 engine. As a result, all of the propellers couldn't be feathered.

The pilot – Jack Kemp was the pilot and he said "Lighten ship". OK, lighten ship, I threw everything out including my map and everything. There was no weight in that but it was the thing to do. Later on, I found out that lighten ship just means to throw the box.

**Q:** Did they throw out the machine guns too?

**PB:** We had a machine gun up in the nose. Anyway, in the activity, we had these earphones that were plugged into the wall. I stepped on it and didn't have any earphones anymore. I looked out in the back and we were the only ones in the plane. You could see from the turret. You could right see through the plane. So, we said let's get the hell out of here.

**Q:** You were on your way to Vienna when you were hit?

**PB:** We had hit Vienna. What else do I need to know? That's the story.

**Q:** So, you bailed out at that point?

**PB:** Yes. I was waiting for the nose gunner to jump out. We were all putting the parachutes on and all that jazz. He was standing there, just standing there. He kept mumbling. I thought he was praying so I didn't interfere.

All of the sudden, he said "ten" and he pulled the ripcord. He was still in the plane right in front of me. The drogue chute popped out and I grabbed him, one by the collar and one by his belt and I just heaved him out. I saved his life but he got a terrible scar on the back of his head when he hit the hatch so that was that.

When I got down to the bottom, when I got down, I was only about maybe a hundred feet or so from my pilot. I was so excited. I was gesturing you know. Jack was burying his parachute so they wouldn't see him. I just ignored all of that. We were in the middle of a potato field from one horizon to the other and I knew damn well that there was no way we were going to get away.

All of the sudden, a whole bunch of farmers came along with shotguns. I had had a 45. When I jumped out, it ripped away. It was just tied on with a shoelace because it went flying. I was unarmed and it turns out that Jack was too.

Before you know it, they surrounded us. I was very friendly with them right away because I spoke a little bit of German. All of the sudden, one of them was like a Gestapo in training. He said (speaks German). He's got the gun and put it under my nose. I got settled down pretty fast. That was the end of that. We just marched back to their barracks that they had there.

We went to an airport, a German airport in (unclear) and, like I said, they didn't know what to do with us either. They were a bunch of untrained....they didn't mean any harm except this one guy, he was going to shoot me. (unclear)

**Q:** Do you know what happened to the rest of your crew? Was it captured also?

**PB:** We had one injury, the radio operator. He was thirty some years old, maybe thirty four. He sprained his ankle coming down, coming down on that potato field. That sprained ankle got worse and worse and worse when he walked on it. The Germans took very good care of him. They sent him to the hospital. Then the Russians were coming then they decided that we had to march out. I wasn't involved in that because I was already on a train to go to Frankfurt am Main. Am I following?

**Q:** Yes.

**PB:** On the train, we saw the prisoners, the forced labor and all that jazz. It was all very obvious.

**Q:** So that was the first time you were aware of the concentration camps and the prisoners like that?

**PB:** Yes. So, when I got to Frankfurt am Main, they put us in a, it was not a barracks, it was just a warehouse. They showed me where I could sleep and they locked me in. In the middle of the night, the guy came and brought me more blankets. They felt sorry for us. It was funny.

**Q:** Did they keep the officers together and the enlisted separate or were you all together.

**PB:** No, I don't know how it was arranged. I have no idea. I was in there. It seems to me that I was in there with a couple of my classmates. Other people had different experiences that went to different places.

So, I went to Frankfurt am Main. We were there, I don't know maybe ten days or so. They interrogated me and my copilot was mad at me because they knew all our names. The Germans had picked up the ship I threw everything out. They got a hold of it. Then they blamed it on me. I told them I had nothing to do with it. That's a mistake. I didn't know what happened. I didn't realize what had transpired.

Before you know it, we got in another train and went north right to the Baltic Sea. That camp was Stalag something or other. I don't know the number. It was one of the early Stalags. It was typical. It was a great big compound and it was subdivided into barracks, one hundred men in each barracks.

We got assigned to a room that had like twenty four men in it. I'm just estimating. At night, one of the guys (unclear) was borderline because he spent all night long telling us pornographic stories

When they found out that I could maybe read or talk German they put me in the #1 camp only four guys together. I was very fortunate you know. I didn't (unclear). I liked it but I sure missed that guy with his pornographic stories.

Then, there were four of us in that little camp, in that little room. I had very little occasion to use what little German I had but they made me...one of my duties was to go out at night and cross the wire. You know they had that wire that you can't cross then they have main wire.

I went across and I was buying and selling. What we had to offer was Red Cross chocolates, Red Cross cigarettes. If they were really desperate, we had some Red Cross meals, you know those canned meals. So, that became my main function was going across the wire at night and trying to negotiate something out of these goodies I had.

**Q:** Was this with local people?

**PB:** They were guards.

**Q:** Guards.

**PB:** I wanted to tell you, when we were in Vienna. Go back to Vienna. They chose the opera house as a prison. We were down in the sub cellar of this prison, of this opera house. One of the guys was my (current) age then. He had been singing. He went up and down the halls singing away. He filled the whole place up with music. He did it for...he wanted to be friends.

So, go back to Barth (Stalag Luft I. Liberated April 30, 1945). When they ended the war, what happened was the Russians came along and they liberated us. Then, our own organization took over. We had a well-organized organization. Nothing changed....the Russians couldn't understand why we weren't happy. We just accepted the fact that we were liberated. It was no big deal you know.

The word came out you've got to show them that we're pleased with them, the Russians. Then, we went out, we tore down the fences and the guard towers. We made a big deal of it. They got so excited.

I had a good friend, I made a very good friend, Sam Seabrook, Sam. He was from Florida, from Tampa. That was strawberry country and the name of the company was Seabrook. He must have stolen that name to get in the Army. He never said that.

We were very good friends. So Sam says to me, "Let's get the hell out of here". We had been jogging. All the time, we were out there jogging until we ran out of energy. Then, we didn't have anything to eat for about two weeks. The Russians gave us bread and they gave us cabbage. We had stored up rations from the Red Cross.

The Russian had a detail (unclear). They were cleaning out. They had just opened something. Then they come with a horse and a tank and they fill the tank with crap and take it out in the field and dump it in the field for fertilizer. As a result of that, they had access to food from the Germans so they passed along some of their food to us.

Later on, I found out the Russians, because they were deserters, they called them deserters because they allowed themselves to become prisoners.

**Q:** The Russians that were captives?|

**PB:** Yes and they killed them all.

In the meantime, I picked up a terrible case of dysentery. Sam and I got the hell out of there and we started running east...west, excuse me and we ran and ran and ran. Before you know, we came across the Russians, the Gypsies. You know the Gypsies, the Roma?

They had the tents set up very elaborately. They had terrific, what should I say....organization. It was like a military organization. So, they treated us very well especially with vodka. Sam fell for it. He got so drunk. I was very cautious. I was brought up that that was poison. I was very evasive. I tried to hide it.

The next day, we picked up and ran some more and ran and ran. We finally got to Lubeck. Are you familiar with Lubeck? Did you ever hear of it?

**Q:** I have heard of it.

**PB:** It's like a seaport, a little tiny fishing port on the Baltic Sea.

**Q:** OK.

**PB:** Here we are in Lubeck. We are wandering into this little city. All of the sudden, we come across this Opel, a brand new car. It was parked very carefully against the curb. I go over and there's the key in the ignition. I didn't even open the door. I just reached in. The window was open and the damn thing started. I could have blown myself up. If could have been booby trapped but I never gave that a thought. I was so delighted to

have a car. We had that car and found the autobahn and got to the German checkpoint. Not the Germans, the British. I get confused. They just passed us on. They were just so happy to see us.

We kept going and going and going. Sam had been a fighter pilot. He had one of those engines, the circular engines with the pistons coming. His specialty was dive bombing. He would dive bomb the German locomotives. The locomotives would get caught in this machine gun fire and blow up. His wingman flew right into the debris. He lost six wingmen. That's serious right? That was his job. He was number one.

So, here we are on the autobahn. Sam is trying to find his old outfit. He was with one of these bomber outfits. That was his specialty. Finally, we got up into the Bavarian Alps and we come to Berchtesgaden. We had taken over Berchtesgaden and made a base out of it. There was his outfit and there was only one guy in his whole outfit that he knew. All of them were shot down or worse. That's the way it was then.

From there, then they got a hold of us. The establishment got a hold of us and they sent us to Paris. They flew us out to Paris and the pilot on the way the way to Paris made a special little trip, a little leg, like what do you call it, a dog leg to Nuremberg. There were all these building and all the (unclear) were in the street. I'll never forget that. I'll never forget that.

Here we are in Paris. They put us up in the....what did they call it...one of the big department stores they converted to barracks (unclear). Did anybody ever mention that?

**Q:** No

**PB:** So, again, Sam has a ball. He went to every red light district there was in Paris. He found out where the liquor was and, oh Jesus. It was very nice....it was very nice.

From there, they put us on a plane and sent us to Camp Lucky Strike. That was the end of my freedom. It was all very military. It was interesting. It took a long time before we got a Liberty ship back to the states, same thing. We finally got back to the states. I don't remember where they brought us. Oh, I know where they brought us. They brought us into Boston. I remember that. What else? What can I tell you?

**Q:** When were you discharged?

**PB:** I was discharged. Then came along with V - E Day. Then they sent me to Fort Dix to be discharged. The girl, the WAC there was enumerating all the medals that I was entitled to. I laughed. I was in the war for five days and you are going to give me a medal for that? That's the way it went. From there, I was out.

**Q:** Did you make any use of the GI Bill at all?

**PB:** Oh yes. I'm under right now. I'm diabetic. I'm not diabetic. Did you ever see one of these (points to his arm)? Put your finger right there. Can you feel my pulse up there?

**Q:** Yes, I can. What is that?

**PB:** OK. It's an implant. It starts here. It's sown to an artery and the blood goes around to a vein on this side. It's made out of plastic fiber tube. The tube is plastic fiber so when you stick it with a needle it won't break. It's a very good invention.

**Q:** You used the GI Bill with the hospital then. Did you ever use the 52-20 club?

**PB:** No. I don't know that.

**Q:** It was like an unemployment insurance when you got out, 52 weeks, \$20 a week.

**PB:** No. I didn't feel I needed that (unclear)

**Q:** Did you stay in contact with anyone who was in the service with you?

**PB:** No. Not particularly.

**Q:** How about veteran's organizations?

**PB:** No

**Q:** Never joined?

**PB:** No

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

**PB:** It changed my head. I was very, very lucky. I was very lucky. I had good experience going over on a ship and a better experience going over on a banana boat and I only had six missions. I was just starting to get worried. You know what I mean. It isn't really where we get. Then I had good experience in the prison camp. So, all in all, I was very, very lucky.

**Q:** Thank you very much for your interview.

**PB:** OK