Ward Vet Tape

Frank Ward Jr. (Pilot) and Nurse Christine Ward, interviewed by Rachel Ward.Transcribed by Mary Meier from Madison Library's veterans' tapes on Oct. 30,2007

Frank Ward Jr. interview Dec. 3, 1984
Q: I understand you were a pilot in World War II. Can you tell us how you got started on your travels as a pilot?

Ward: All very simple. I was in my second year of college at the University of New Hampshire and I believe it was in October in 1941. Everyone over 21 had to sign up for service. Which I did. Several weeks later the Air Force recruiting team came around trying to sign up men to go to be pilots. I took them up on it and it so happened that I passed the physical examination and was qualified to join the Air Force.

Q: Did you have to leave the state for the training?

Ward: Yes. I was left to finish my college year and in June of 1942 orders came that I was to report to East St. Louis, Illinois,for primary flight training which I did and successfully passed the primary . We were sent to Randolph Field basic training.

Q: What city is that near?

Ward: San Antonio. After successfully completing that course We went out to Ellington Field which is near Houston, Texas. About 30 miles east of Houston. And I completed that course of advanced flyer training and orders came through. That was when I received my second lieutenant commission and was promptly ordered to go to MacDill to be trained for the B-17.

Q: MacDill Field?

Ward: Yes. That's in Tampa, Fla.

Q: Did they assign you a certain kind of flying there or did you have to fly this and fly that?

Ward: Well, it was learning to fly the B-17 airplane. They had instructor pilots assigned to train the new pilots that came in and the first year of training would be observation for a few flights. You sit behind the wheel, see how it felt to guide this plane around. After 15 or 20 hours you would be allowed to land, do take-offs and landings. It was mostly that procedure for quite awhile until you could really land and take-off the airplane. After a considerable number of hours you would be taken up and do instrument flying, which the local Tampa radio station had all the facilities for learning to fly instruments. New pilots were always coming in and after we were qualified to fly the plane we would teach them how to fly.

Q: Each one had to teach one?

Ward: You just had to keep the ball rolling. You might not continue to fly with the pilot you were training. He might take over another airplane after he had learned all the ins and outs of the B-17.

Q: Did you have a full year of flight training?

Ward: Not quite a full year. Each of the primary, basic and advanced were ten week periods.

Q: From there did they assign you to a squadron?

Ward: Yes. After we had learned to fly the planes this 92nd bomb group was formed. Each bomb group consisted of three squadrons. Each squadron consisted of seven planes and each of those planes, of course had pilots, co-pilots. They had a headquarters squadron which eventually molded into another seven planes. So we had

about 28 airplanes total to form the full group. It was called a group after the squadrons were put together. After all the planes were organized we moved on to another station which was Bradendon Air Force Base in Bradendon, Fla. That was a very short period of time, some sleeping out on the prairies in sleeping bags whatnot.

Q: Oh, maneuvers.

Ward: Maneuvers, yeah. Then we were headed north and the next stop was Bangor, Me. That was a time when all the planes were completely equipped with the necessary radio equipment. All the guns were installed. They were put in combat readiness.

Q: So you knew you were on your way then.

Ward: We knew we were on our way all right. The group previous to ours taking off for England had a considerable amount of trouble with weather. Most of them landed on the Greenland ice cap, so our commanding officer, Col Sutton, who is now dead, went to Washington and saw what he called the Great White Father.

Q: Roosevelt?

Ward: Gen. Arnold was commander-in-chief at that point and he got permission for the 92nd Bomb Group to fly direct from Gander to Preswick, England, which we did. Everyone had a very satisfactory flight and we all landed in England.

Q: What part of England was that? Was it north of London?

Ward: It was up in Scotland near Glasgow. We only stayed there for a couple of days. Then we went to Bobington, which was only about 30 miles north of London.

Q: Is that where you were stationed all the time for your missions?

Ward: We had two missions out of Bobington. There was an area of England which they called The Wash, where eventually most of all the the Eighth Air Force was stationed. All the bases were six or eight miles apart. Our next base was called Alconbury. That's where I spent the rest of my career.

Q: Did you live totally in barracks or elsewhere?

Ward: No. There were barracks. They had coal heat in them and showers. They weren't that bad a life. They had trucks that did most of the transporting of the personnel. They had their scheduled runs to the
barracks, to the living quarters. If you wanted to go somewhere you'd grab a truck and go to where you were somewhat near where you wanted to be.

Q: So you didn't travel by train then?

Ward: Very, very little. If somebody had a week's vacation, something like that,he'd go to London or almost anywhere.

Q: So what was your first mission like? What you thought it was going to be?

Ward: It turned out to be quite disastrous.We took off for this mission about noontime. Our commanding oficer said if you get over the English Channel and anything is wrong with your airplane, turn around and come home. If you have guns that misfire or a generator that isn't working or something of that nature, turn around and come home. He didn't want us over there unless we could put up 100 per cent. So we got over the French coast and one of my wingmen took off. He left. He disappeared (somewhere in the plane?) and about two minutes after that the right wingman left. About two minutes after that the fighters hit and that was when the tail gunner was killed instantly. The waist gunner, which is the (word?) in the center. He had two windows in there which he manned both guns. He was hit. These were all 30-caliber bullets. And the ball(?) turret gunner was hit from below on his

right arm.

Q: That meant they were coming up at you too.

Ward: They'd go down by the plane and come up at you like that. The navigator had a 20-millimeter explode down in his area and he got some shrapnel in his right leg. And the Trim Tab(?) was destroyed and both gas tanks were punctured, but the engine still continued to function properly.

Q: God.

Ward: There wasn't anything to do but turn around and come home. I couldn't keep the airplane on an even keel. It took both the pilot and co-pilot to hold the stick forward, otherwise she would go into a steep climb. We practically had to do it on half power. We got back and that was it. That was the first mission.

Q: How many men out of the crew?

Ward: Four men out of the crew.

Q: And a crew was about?

Ward: Nine men. Four of them were eliminated. The airplane was put back in the hanger and used for spare parts. The engine was still good. Many parts of it were all right. I was given a job as operations officer. Pretty soon Col. Sutton decided -- we were moved up to Alconbury for about four months. That's up in The Wash with the rest of the B-17 groups. I was given another crew and literally speaking (?) I did the rest of my missions and never got a scratch.

Q: Terrific.

Ward: That's about the end of it. It didn't all happen that fast. I was squadron commander for awhile. Then you didn't fly every mission. You would go on a misson and some other squadron would take the lead and you'd go lead another group. It took longer to do the missions than some of the guys who were flying every day. You didn't fly every day, I mean, but whenever they had missions.

Q: Where did they fly to? They bombed all of Germany anyway. Did they bomb in France?

Ward: They started to go inland, into Germany. The German fighters were so active we were losing too many planes. After France was out of the picture all the German aircraft moved down on the French coast where the Germans had their fighter bases. We did several missions inland and then it got so expensive that they decided we might was well knock the German Air Force out of the picture. At the beginning of the war we didn't have our own fighter escorts. That made it pretty rough going. After six months or so every mission was on these airfields, along the French coast and in Belgium, Germany, and down along the French coast were the German Air Force was stationed. It didn't take too long before we made quite an impression on their action. It knocked them out. We literally riddled their air bases and destroyed their airplanes. We finally got to them and they had to move back inland. What was left of them.

Q; How far back did they move? Out to the mountains?

Ward: They went back inside Germany. God knows where. They had all kinds of bases inland, back away from the coast. They weren't as bothersome then after we began to get our fighter escort.

Q: What kind of planes were your fighter escort?

Ward: They were B-51s.

Q: Oh yeah, little.

Ward: Little fellows. Single engine. B-51s, B-38s and B-47s. I don't know how many there were. We started across and all of a sudden a cloud of fighters would come over and we felt a considerable lot better when we saw those boys around.

Q: This is a funny thing to ask. When my husband was over there he said some churches were spared. They would bomb all around the churches but some churches were spared. How do you figure that?

Ward: You couldn't really. Just chance, I think. When we had our briefings there were aerial photographs of all the area. They would spot where the churches were. If at all possible, do not aim where your bombs will hit the church. We were given those instructions. It wasn't just accidental that they're still all there.

Q: Very few of them were hit.

Ward: That's right. We made an effort not to bomb the churches.

Q: The devastation was extreme though, wasn't it?

Ward: It had to be, Yes. It had to be.

Q: How big a load did they take with them when they went?

Ward: We carried five tons.

Q: My word, that's a lot. What was the major kind?

Ward: It all depended. Now, when we bombed the submarine pens, it was armor piercing bombs. They were usually 2000-pound armor piercing bombs. When it was munition factories or something of that nature, it would be incendiary bombs, 500-pounders. Incendiary bombs weren't that big. We'd carry 200-pound bombs. We'd carry a load of those things, just saturate.

Q: That's why it was so complete, wasn't it?

Ward: Some groups would be carrying armor piercing bombs and some would carry incendiary bombs and others would be carrying general purpose bombs, just to blow things apart.

Q: Did you ever carry any parachutes?

Ward, Oh, yes, we all had parachutes.

Q: Did you ever have parachute troops in your command?

Ward: No, that was a different command altogether. We all carried parachutes in case we had to bail out for our own safety. We were just plain bombers. Cargo ships were guys that brought troops over and supplies. They kept the different kinds of planes separate. You'd have your bomber groups and you'd have troop carriers and supplies. The different kinds were in their own separate groups.

Q: Were there any men who refused to do what they were supposed to do. Was there anyone you built a trust in fail you?

Ward: No, no one refused.

Q: Carrying giant bombs. I wondered if anybody caused mishaps because they lost their cool even though they were trained. When the final word came ---

Ward: They were well trained. I can remember once a crew came over. I think it was the navigator who just couldn't face it. He just absolutely couldn't face it. He

lost his cool. He just couldn't think. He got the shakes. I don't know what you'd call it.

Q: Nowadays they'd have a psychologist there.

Ward: Yes, he needed a psychologist before they let him fly at all.
He wasn't punished. He just simply went off his rocker. That happened occasionally. It was trying.

Q: Another thing I wanted to ask: did the men have enough R and R to get over the urgency day after day after day. Did they get enough rest between missions?

Ward: Men went on a mission and then they were free until the next mission came along.

Q: I see. So they had some time out.

Ward: Oh, yes. They had some time out. After a certain number
of missions there were "rest homes" down in southern England. A whole crew would be assigned to a "rest home" for a full week. A crew member could go hunting, go fishing. He was completely off duty. The time was his. You didn't fly every day. There might be a mission but the weather would be bad and the mission would be scrubbed. There wouldn't be a mission. The mission was still scheduled but a crew might try again the next day. It might be two or three days before the mission was flown.
There were plenty of crews. Not every crew had to fly every day. That was really a no-no because the men would get too tired.

Q: The pressure would be extreme. Did you have adequate housing and food while you were there?

Ward: Yes, we did. The food and housing was excellent. You wouldn't have steak and eggs every night, but your food would be good. It would be adequate. Everyday quarters were fine. We didn't live in mudholes. We put up with lots and lots of rain. You couldn't go out of doors without your raincoat. England is very wet.

Q: How many months were you in England?

Ward: I landed in England Aug. 17, 1942, and I came home in September of 1944. I was over there two years and two or three months.

Q: So they sent you right home after V-E Day?

Ward: No, I came home after I completed my tour of duty. I did my 35 missions. That was all you were required to do.

Q: Thirty-five missions and then you were rotated back to the States?

Ward: That's right. You were rotated back to the States. After I came back to the States, I had 21 days leave. Then I was assigned to Bryant, Texas, to the instrument flying school.

Q: They kept you in the service longer than that?

Ward: Oh, yes. I was still in the service. After I finished the instrument flying course in Bryant, Texas, I was assigned to Lockman (sp?) Air Base, which was in Columbus, Ohio. I was base operations there until I was discharged.

Q: So you probably trained a lot of men through 1944 to 1945?

Ward: Yes, instruments. We'd always fly instruments on the local radio station, practice landings and take-offs.

Q: Were you training men then for the Pacific?

Ward: No, none of our pilots. None that I trained went to the Pacific.

Q: They'd probably already been trained and gotten to the Pacific by then, I suppose. I haven't reviewed my dates well enough to know but wasn't there fully a year between V-E and V-J Day, wasn't there?

Ward: Yes, there was.But by 1944 things had started to slow down a little bit. We had V-E Day and all those groups were being broken up. All the troops and the pilots and crews were being sent home and most of them were being discharged.

Q: I was in college then and that's when they started coming back to the college campuses. What an impact!

Ward: God, yes.

Q: knocked everything into a cocked hat, you know. We didn't have the proper professors. The discharged came in droves, really,because of the G.I. bill.

Ward: They all came back, were discharged and went back to school.

Q: It really hit the colleges hard when they all returned because they were not kids. They were men and women of great experience

Ward: I can imagine.