

## TRANSCRIPT OF VETERAN'S HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW

Transcribed April 7-10, 2004, by Ryan Elder

**RYAN ELDER:** Today is October 4, 2003. This is the beginning of an interview with Mr. Gus Dietrich at his home at 709 Lancelot Drive in Greenville, North Carolina. My name is Ryan Elder and I will be the interviewer. The tape recorder of this interview is Miss Rikki DeMarco. Mr. Dietrich, I talked to Father Pat at St. Peter's and he said that you served in World War II in the Air Force.

**GUS DIETRICH:** That's right.

**ELDER:** Is that right?

**DIETRICH:** That's right.

**ELDER:** And what rank did you--?

**DIETRICH:** I was a technical sergeant when I was discharged.

**ELDER:** How did you become involved in the Air Force?

**DIETRICH:** Well, I was drafted. (Laughs.)

**ELDER:** When was that?

**DIETRICH:** Oh, 1943. February, 1943.

**ELDER:** Did you have any choice with going into the Air Force?

**DIETRICH:** I had some choice, yeah. I chose the Air Force.

**ELDER:** Why was that?

**DIETRICH:** I don't know. I didn't want to be marching. (Laughs.)

**ELDER:** Did you go to Boot Camp as part of your—

**DIETRICH:** No. We went to Basic Training. Basic Training in Miami Beach, Florida. Which was a pleasure, to be on the beach for Basic Training.



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**ELDER:** What sorts of things did you do in Basic Training?

**DIETRICH:** Well, we did physical—physical exercise and marching and rifle—went on the rifle range—and we lived in a hotel right on the beachfront. So we'd get done marching for the day, we'd put our bathing suits on, and went in the ocean. It was great.

**ELDER:** And Father Patrick told me that you flew out of England—

**DIETRICH:** No. Flew out of Italy. Italy.

**ELDER:** Where in Italy was that?

**DIETRICH:** We were in a little town—near a town called Sarignola. I don't know you spell it; just figure it out. Sarignola.

**ELDER:** And what was that like?

**DIETRICH:** Well the town had one big – the center square had one big huge cathedral that you could see from the air from—well, we'd come back across the Adriatic Sea. You could see the Cathedral at Sarignola and you knew you were home. We were about seven or eight miles from the center of town. And you'd come back across the water the first thing you saw was the steeple of the cathedral at Sarignola. Then you knew you were home.

**ELDER:** Let's see. You said you were a technical sergeant?

**DIETRICH:** Tech sergeant, yes. I was a radio operator.

**ELDER:** And what did you have to do as a part of that?

**DIETRICH:** Well most of the job was to be a gunner. The radio operator—we were on radio silence most of the time. The only time you used the radio was if you were flying in the lead plane. Then you kept contact with the base. The rest of – the rest of the planes were on radio silence. The only ones who could talk to one another were the pilots, and they had short wave—short range radios that wouldn't transmit more than twenty-five or thirty miles. But

my set would transmit around the world. It was a worldwide shortwave radio station in there.

You could transmit around the world if you had to.

**ELDER:** That's pretty neat. Rikki and I read Catch-22 by Joseph Heller for English class—

**DIETRICH:** I saw the movie but I don't remember much of it. Saw it years and years and years ago.

**ELDER:** From what you remember was it anything—was the movie anything like your experiences?

**DIETRICH:** Not really. We didn't spend much time in the town. I remember one time going into town and we were looking for something to eat and we found a black man, a sergeant, and we said, "Sergeant, where can we get something to eat?" He said, "I'll take you to a house," and he took us to a house and a lady cooked spaghetti for us. That's the only time I really had anything to do with the Italian people. Because we were – we were out in the country. There was no – no farmers or anything nearby.

**ELDER:** Was that just where they situated the base?

**DIETRICH:** The base was a former German air base. When the Germans got pushed out we took over the air base.

**ELDER:** And was that – were there no people around because---

**DIETRICH:** Well there were a few farmers around. And the kids from town used to come and get our laundry. They took it to town and do our laundry for us.

**ELDER:** And what did you do in the camp for, like, fun and things like that?

**DIETRICH:** Not much. Not much. When we were flying regularly you didn't have time to do much. We got up at 4:00 in the morning, and by 5:00 in the afternoon you were ready for dinner and go to bed cause you had to get up at 4:00 the next morning, so there wasn't much

activity. We did have a noncom bar where if you had a day off you could maybe get a drink.

But outside of that there was nothing to do.

**ELDER:** What sort of places did you fly to?

**DIETRICH:** Well we flew to Vienna, Austria – I tried to find my – I can't find my little diary. I had a diary that had every mission marked down and numbered, and I can't find it. It's around here somewhere but I can't find it. We went to Vienna, Munich, northern Italy. We flew the invasion of southern France, not D-Day, but it was D-Day in southern France. They broke up the southern front. We bombed a bridge with the advancing troops on that day. And Yugoslavia, Romania. We went to Plessy Air Field--the oil fields--about five times. That's it. The picture up there on the wall by Robert Taylor. That is a picture of--. That was a jigsaw puzzle we found. And it's a picture of a low-level raid on Plessy. Which we weren't a part of. That happened before we ever got overseas. Cause those guys came from Africa and flew over to Romania, and then bombed it at 100 feet off the ground. Our missions were always 20,000 feet.

**ELDER:** Did anyone get shot down out of your squadron?

**DIETRICH:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. Um-hum. We--can I tell you the story?

**ELDER:** Please do.

**DIETRICH:** OK. The group was flying three – there's four squadrons in a group. And every day we were flying three squadrons—one—the fourth squadron had the day off. So one day they came in about 4:00 in the morning and woke up our crew. And said, "You guys have to fly." And we said, "No. It's our day off." They said, "You have to fly." So we went over to the other squadron and took one of their planes. Because they needed another crew. And flew with them. And we flew to Blackhammer, Germany. I don't know how you spell that either.

It's spelled a German—a German way. Which is where Austria and Finland and Germany come together. If you can imagine the map—the former map of Europe. It's about as far as a B-24 could fly from our base in Italy. And over the target we got hit by flak. And then on the way home we got hit by a fighter over Romania. And he took one pass at us and either he was out of gas or out of ammunition because he took one pass at us. Didn't shoot us down. He did a lot of damage but he didn't shoot us down. Then he took off and didn't come back again. And we had one dead already and one wounded on board at that point. And then coming back over the Adriatic Sea we ran out of gas. The plane was shot up pretty bad, but we were still flying. And we ran out of gas over the Adriatic. And we ditched in the Adriatic Sea. The pilot parked the plane on the water.

**ELDER:** How many—that's not very common, is it?

**DIETRICH:** Well during that week—I've been talking to the fella I thought—the former mayor of Greenville, Les Garner, a friend of mine, and he was a radio operator on a B-24. And along in August of '44 his crew found a plane floating on the water – a B-24 floating on the water in the Adriatic Sea, and he radioed in an SOS for 'em. And we tried to figure out whether—our records are confused. We're trying to figure out whether that was the same day, but we come to find out that that week about eight planes ditched in the Adriatic Sea. So it could have been us or it could have been another one but it's a pretty close call. It might have been Les Garner who sent in our SOS because our radio was shot up. We couldn't—I couldn't transmit. And besides, the back end of the plane was covered in gasoline. If I'd have got a spark in the radio, we'd have been all gone. But we crashed into the sea and, how can I say it, two more of our crew were killed. Four were killed that day, and the tail gunner, he bailed out over Yugoslavia somewhere. Without orders. He bailed out. And that's another

story I'll come to later. (Laughs.) There were four of us left in the plane and four dead. And we pulled out the life rafts and inflated them and they were shot full of holes. They sank. And then – well, the B-24 carries 2400 gallons of gas. But our gas tanks were empty, so we had 2400 gallons of air under the wings. That couldn't come out. You understand what I'm saying? So the B-24 was supposed to sink in 30 seconds in the water. Ours floated for an hour. And we were rescued off the wing of the plane . We were sitting on the wing of the plane when the rescue boat came and picked us up. And we sat there in the rescue boat and watched the plane sink. The plane sank. We were rescued because we—I understand--I just found this year that we –where we—where we crashed—I wasn't sure; the Adriatic's a big place. We were about twenty miles from the island of Nice, which is an island off the coast of Yugoslavia, about 50 miles off the coast of Yugoslavia on the Adriatic Sea, and Yugoslavia was controlled all by the Germans. The whole country. But the British had captured this island in the middle of the Adriatic Sea and had an air base on it. And that's where our pilot was headed, to the air base. On the island of Nice. And we ran out of gas. And were rescued by a rescue boat from the island of Nice. We were in the hospital there at that air base. And another thing happened at the air base—another crew came in and they made a forced landing on the air base and the British who controlled it were pushing a plane—some kind of a plane across the runway and this guy came in with his plane shot up and he had to land and they had a crash at the end of the runway. And his whole crew was killed, all except the pilot. He lost nine men in the crash, except the pilot got out without being hurt. And that pilot and my pilot met in the hospital and they had been in pilot training together. They had been in the same class. Talk about a coincidence. They had been in the same pilot training program

together and they knew one another and they both lost their crews on the same day. That's an amazing story.

**ELDER:** So were you wounded?

**DIETRICH:** I was wounded. Yeah, I had pieces of flak – well, it wasn't flak, it was pieces of the airplane. A shell exploded in the skin of the airplane and blew the aluminum like sand, I guess, or scraps of metal all over the back of the plane and I got a face full of it. My face was all covered with pieces of metal and the doctor had to pick them out with tweezers, pieces of metal out of my face.

**ELDER:** Did that hurt?

**DIETRICH:** It hurt. Yeah, it hurt. It hurt. But I wasn't wounded really bad. It didn't affect my eyes or anything. I was in, just in one side of my face. And I had a big— I don't know. Something hit me in the back of the neck. I had a big scar—a big gash in the back of my neck. I don't know—I had no idea where that came from.

**ELDER:** So what about that pilot over Yugoslavia?

**DIETRICH:** Well, the tail gunner jumped out over Yugoslavia, and we hadn't heard from him. But when we came back from over seas, the Air Force used the hotels at Atlantic City for hospitals. They were Air Force hospitals in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Have you ever been to Atlantic City, I guess? Have you?

**ELDER:** I've seen pictures.

**DIETRICH:** You've seen pictures. Well there's one hotel – it's all casinos now, but in those days there was one hotel after another. And they used them for hospitals. We were walking down the boardwalk one evening – I'd gone there for reassignment, and one day—one evening walking down the boardwalk and I see my tail gunner being pushed in a wheelchair

by a nurse. And this was almost a year after we'd been shot down. And he had lost a leg and he was in a hospital in Atlantic City, and I met up with him.

**ELDER:** Do you have a story to tell about him, or was it—

**DIETRICH:** Well I didn't really get to talk to him. I don't remember – I remember meeting him, and we talked for a while, but I don't remember any of his story, what happened to him. I just--In fact all this, all this was gone from my memory, most of it, until the B-24, the All American came here to visit a few years ago. About ten years ago. Well, what happened, I went to an air show in Norfolk, and when I walked in at the gate, there was a B-24 sitting there. And I hadn't seen one in about 30 years, I guess, or more, maybe 40 years. I hadn't seen a B-24. And there's one sitting there. It's the All American, which is owned by a millionaire up in Boston and it goes on tour around the country every year. And I gave a donation to help maintain it, and about two years later I get a call from him. He wanted to bring the B-24 to Greenville. And so this is part of the Les Garner story now. So he gave a list of names. He says, "Call some-- Here's a list of names I got from your area. They might be able to help you with publicity or what-not, so I called one fellow named Garner, he says, "You don't want to talk to me, you want to talk to my father. Les Garner, the mayor of Greenville." He says, "He was on a B-24—He was a radio operator on a B-24, like you were." (Laughs.) So I says, "OK." And I call Les Garner and we talk for about an hour, and that's when we decided maybe he could have been the one that radioed in our SOS. Talk about a small world. But since then we're not sure whether it was him or not; there's some confusion over it. Over the dates, but it could have been.

**ELDER:** So did you fight in Italy up until the surrender of Germany?



**DIETRICH:** No, I finished my missions—my 35 missions—I was just looking at my thing—I came home in April of—April of '45, I came home. I finished my missions in April of '45. I was on the boat coming home when President Roosevelt died. I think that was around the first of May in '45. We were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean when the President died. They got the news.

**ELDER:** So did you have to be taken over to Italy in a boat? You didn't fly?

**DIETRICH:** Oh, no, we flew over. We took a plane over. We flew over. Coming home, this was coming home. They put us on a transport. A military transport. It was the *U.S.S. Manhattan*, which was a former cruise ship they had converted into a troop ship. And it traveled so fast that we didn't have any submarine or any escort. They figured that no submarines could catch up with that, no matter what. It traveled so fast. It came home all by itself.

**ELDER:** And what was your reaction when you found out the Germans had surrendered? What kind of--

**DIETRICH:** Well, I'll tell you, I was a civilian when the Germans surrendered. I was already out of the Army. Out of the Air Force. I already had my—I'd been discharged about a month before that. Because I had a point system—you got so many points for each medal you had, so many for each combat theater you were in. My discharge says I was in five theaters of operation. Flying out of Italy, because—southern France, northern France, Italy, Germany, we flew to Germany, we flew to Czechoslovakia, we flew to Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, and I think we even had some missions—I didn't fly any, but I think we had some missions to Greece, our group. So all over Southern Europe. So I was in five different combat zones.

**ELDER:** And –

**DIETRICH:** I don't remember. All I remember was celebrating. A big celebration with my family, though, on D-Day. I don't remember exactly the details of it. Like I said, all this came back to memory when I started talking to Les Garner here in Greenville.

**ELDER:** And did you make any close friends in the service?

**DIETRICH:** Well, four of my best friends were my crew members who were killed. They—we went through all training together, and we were crewmates for maybe about twenty missions or so before we got shot down. And then after that, my pilot and copilot and I, we were on training exception. We trained new crews or flew with them on their first mission to break them in. So we flew every day with different – different people. (Laughs.) We flew every day with different people, and there was about ten of us that lived in a tent but that--they were all odd crew members. Not members of any specific crew, and they'd maybe live with us for a week and then they'd get shot down or transferred and moved around so there was no—it was hard to tell if what you're looking for is camaraderie. After the crew got shot down, we just--all we did was work. But we did have--for a while we had a puppy. And we'd take the puppy on flights with us and we'd put him in a flying boot. That statue there with the furry flying boot? The little pup, we'd put him in a flying boot when it got cold up in the air, we'd stuff him in a flying boot so he wouldn't get cold. (Laughs.) Around here somewhere I've got a picture of him. (Laughs.)

**ELDER:** Have you kept up with anybody from the--

**DIETRICH:** Not--One fella that lives in Charlotte, I never flew with him, but he lived in our tent for a while. But I haven't heard from him—I saw him at a reunion about five years ago. That was the last time. I didn't even know who the—I didn't even know who the mess

sergeant was of the group. We'd go eat, and I'd met him at one of our reunions. He says, "I was the mess sergeant for four or five years of the 459<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group," and I says, "I've never met you." (Laughs.) All I did was eat his food. I can't give you much personal. It's all—that's all gone from my mind, personal history. More or less.

**ELDER:** So you mentioned reunions. Do you go—

**DIETRICH:** Oh, I—I do. Yeah. I go occasionally. In fact, look right behind you. There's—the first folder right next to the adding machine. Is our newsletter. No, not the Air Force. That. That's—That is the bulletin from the 459<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Turn it over. It's called the "Pathfinder," and it keeps us up with the people from the 459<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group.

**ELDER:** And was that the unit you—

**DIETRICH:** Yeah. The 459<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 758<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. And we're going to the—I didn't go this year—right about now, I think this week, they're in Las Vegas. I hate to miss that one, but— (Laughs.) They have a reunion in Las Vegas, but I couldn't make it. And next year it's going to be in Washington, DC, so that's almost a commute from here.

**ELDER:** Are you involved in any veterans' organizations?

**DIETRICH:** Oh, yeah. I belong to the VFW, Post 7032. That's the only veterans' organization besides the Bomb Group. The Association.

**ELDER:** Why did you join that? Just because?

**DIETRICH:** Well, the Bomb Group? The Association, you mean?

**ELDER:** The VFW.

**DIETRICH:** I joined the VFW up in New Jersey. Where I lived before. I dunno why—The kids had left home and I was looking for something to do, I guess, so I joined the VFW.

**ELDER:** And so what's it like to be around these people who have had similar experiences to you but—

**DIETRICH:** Well, we sit and talk. We sit and talk. (Laughs.) And we go to reunions. And you can sit down around anybody, know them or not, sit down around anybody, and start talking to them, and they'll tell you their story and you'll tell them your story, and it's great. Reunions are great. I'm eighty years old. I just can't travel that much anymore. I'd love to go on out to Las Vegas this week and stay there for a week or so, but I just can't stand that kind of carrying on anymore, much.

**ELDER:** So what did you do when you came back home? As far as your occupation?

**DIETRICH:** Well I had a half-a-dozen different jobs. For about fifteen years I owned a hardware store. I was in the hardware business. In Trenton, New Jersey. Then K-Mart moved in a couple miles away and a couple other supermarkets and put me out of business. So I sold the hardware store. I have a degree in accounting.

**ELDER:** Did you get that before you went off?

**DIETRICH:** No, I was—I got it on the G.I. Bill. I went to Ryder College in Trenton, New Jersey. Which nobody ever heard of, but I got a job with the State of New Jersey after that. After I closed the hardware store, I worked for the State. In the Treasury Department. And one day my wife came home—she was a public health nurse—and she says, "I'm tired out of driving around in all this traffic." She says, "I just handed in my resignation." So I went in the next day and handed in mine. I was 65, and she was about 63. So she retired so I quit. (Laughs.) In the meantime my daughter had moved down here to Greenville, so we took a trip down and looked over Greenville, went to the church, went to Mass at the church, and my son-in-law teaches at the University, and so we liked what we saw down here, and moved

down. Retired. Didn't like Florida. I have a son that lives in Tallahassee, Florida, and wouldn't move there, another daughter lives in Boston, and Route 1 is a mile from her house, and it's like the race track at the start of a race, it's three wide 24 hours a day going up Route 1, and too much. Too busy. Too busy. And then the other daughter, her husband is in the Marine Corps. And they were—at that time they were (? 3 years ?) in another base somewhere. They kept moving, so we couldn't keep up with them, so we decided to come here. We like it here, we have good friends here, church—which church you go to?

**ELDER:** St. Peter's.

**DIETRICH:** You go to St. Peter's? Oh! What's your name—what's your last name?

**ELDER:** Elder.

**DIETRICH:** Elder—let me look you up in the book-- (Laughs.) I'm the usher at the 12:10 Mass. I'm an usher at the 12:10 Mass.

**ELDER:** I've seen you there. I didn't really make the connection between the face and the name, but I—

**DIETRICH:** It's funny. We just signed up for a cell phone this week, and the lady that sold it to us was Mrs. Prokop. Do you know the Prokops from church?

**ELDER:** I don't think so.

**DIETRICH:** No, well they've been here ever since we've been here, and we met her, and she sold us this phone, and we'd heard her name at church but we'd never met her. (Laughs.) The church is too big. It's too big. Too many people. Can't know 'em all.

**ELDER:** St. Gabe's is opening up a new church, they—

**DIETRICH:** Oh, yeah.

**ELDER:** What was—were you active in the Church when you were in—

**DIETRICH:** Uh, well, Parent-Teacher Association. I was an usher for a while along with the Parent-Teacher Association. We had six kids who went to the grammar school.

**ELDER:** At St. Peter's or—

**DIETRICH:** No, no—St. Anthony's in Trenton, New Jersey. When we moved down here my kids are all married.

**ELDER:** Oh, that's right.

**DIETRICH:** Yeah.

**ELDER:** When you were in Italy did you go to the cathedral or—

**DIETRICH:** Yeah. We went every chance we got, we went to Mass. I went to Mass at the cathedral. There was a Mexican fellow on our crew, and he was Catholic. He was the only other Catholic, so he and I would go in when we had Sunday off. We didn't always have Mass at the base. About once a month the chaplain would come and say Mass at the base. So when we had a Sunday off when we didn't have to work or fly, we went to Sarignola and went to Mass on Sunday. And over there in Italy, only the women go to Mass. The men don't go to Mass. All the men stand out smoking cigars out on the town square on Sunday morning. The women are all in church. It's strange.

**ELDER:** Is the Church in Italy basically like the one in America?

**DIETRICH:** Well, you mean the physical church or the—

**ELDER:** The physical church and the—

**DIETRICH:** Well, it's hard to tell. We'd go to Mass and we couldn't talk to anybody, because we didn't speak any Italian. (Laughs.) But the church over there didn't have pews. They just had chairs. Just had a few chairs sitting around. But it was a huge, a huge basilica in this

small town. And like I've told you, it was a beacon when we were flying. You knew where you were when you saw the church.

**ELDER:** I've gotten off track. Did you—have you had any experience with shell-shock when you came back?

**DIETRICH:** No. No. No, they took us off of combat status for about ten months. The pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, and I were the only ones left. And we didn't fly combat missions for about ten months. I'd have been home—I could have finished my 35 missions in about two months, the way they were flying about three every four days. In a couple of months I should have been done if I didn't get shot down. But we spent about I guess maybe about eight or nine months training crews and testing planes and things like that. Then they put us back on. They decided we could go back flying combat missions again. Then we finished up.

**ELDER:** Why did they take you off, just—

**DIETRICH:** Well, people who have experiences like that, they—If I didn't want to fly again, I could have said, "No, I don't want to," and that would have been it. That would have been it. They would have put me on a ground job.

**ELDER:** And how has being a veteran affected your life in general?

**DIETRICH:** Well...

**ELDER:** The experiences of combat?

**DIETRICH:** I don't think it's really had any effect on my life. I came back and adapted to civilian life with no problems. Like I said, all this—I got married, had kids, and all this went out of my memory. I didn't think about it. For years and years. Didn't even—had no connection with the Bomb Group—only joined the Bomb Group about fifteen years ago, the Association. And that's another coincidence. The secretary of the Bomb Group lived near me

and came to my hardware store. He was one of my customers. And I didn't know his name. And he was a customer, and I—and we went to the first reunion, and I met him, and told him who I was, and he said, “I was one of your customers.” (Laughs.) And I had no idea that he was in my--He was right in our neighborhood, and I had no idea that he had been in the 459<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group.

**ELDER:** How many people come to these reunions?

**DIETRICH:** Hmmm?

**ELDER:** How many people come to these reunions?

**DIETRICH:** Oh. At the last one, I think they had two hundred, two hundred members. We have found over a thousand. I'm number 806. My membership number's 806, and since then the membership's gone over a thousand. But a lot of those are no longer with us. People are-- Every time we get one of those notices, or newspapers, five or six or maybe ten of them have died. We're losing—we're losing members fast.

**ELDER:** Is there anything else you can remember?

**DIETRICH:** Well, my last mission. It was just supposed to be what they call a milk run, we were just supposed to bomb an air field or something somewhere over in Yugoslavia. And they started shooting flak at us, and I came out of it with a dent in my helmet. A piece of flak hit my helmet. I had a big dent in my helmet. We wore a steel helmet when we flew. I didn't--And we had a couple holes in the plane—one shell exploded in there somewhere—and I looked at my helmet when I came down—I didn't feel it when we were up there—I looked at the helmet and there was a big dent in it. I'd been hit. We—we were hit. I was missing in action twice. We--one time, we were up over—I forget where we were going—but we were up over Trieste north of the Adriatic Sea, and you fly north around Switzerland into



Germany. Into Germany, I guess. And we lost an engine up over there. The engine quit, so we turned around to go back, and we landed in an air base up in northern Italy. A U.S. Air Force base, a fighter base. And for some reason they couldn't communicate with our base right away. So when we didn't land with the rest of the group, they sent my mother a missing-in-action notice. She got a telegram the next day. So the next day they repaired our plane and we flew home. (Laughs.) And I wrote her right away and said, "If you get a missing-in-action notice, don't pay any attention. I'm alive." But then the day we got shot down over the Adriatic they sent her another one because we didn't come back. They did that automatically. If a crew didn't come back, they were missing in action. They didn't know where they were. So twice I was missing action but I really wasn't.

**ELDER:** You knew exactly where you were.

**DIETRICH:** We knew where we were, but nobody else did. (Laughs.)

**ELDER:** Is there anything else at all?

**DIETRICH:** Naw, did you want to look at the—

**ELDER:** Yes, please.

**DIETRICH:** --my pictures? My medals are up there on the wall if you want to turn your camera around and see if you can focus on them. ... That's the Purple Heart there on the left, the Good Conduct Medal, the Air Medal. And I don't have the European Theater. I should have a European Theater Medal, but I never received it. It's on my record, but I never got the actual medal. And there—those are—one of those pairs of wings is an original one that I received when I graduated from fly—from gunnery school. I don't know which one it is. One pair of wings is my actual first pair that I earned in gunnery school.

**ELDER:** Where did you get the other?

**DIETRICH:** Well the other one is one I bought at the PX because I don't know—I've got another one. I've got several of them. I've got one on my VFW hat. You can buy them at the PX anywhere. But they are—I was in the United States Army Air Corps, okay, as opposed to the United States Air Force. I was part of the Army, not part of the Air Force—the Air Force wasn't started till, I think, 1946 or '48. Something like that. They started calling us the Air Force. And then they changed the gunner's wings, now are different. Those were originally what they call observer wings. Because both fighter planes used to have a pilot and an observer. And the observer had the wings with the round crest on it. And they were still, in 1943 or '44, they were still issuing those to gunners.

**ELDER:** What do your color bars signify?

**DIETRICH:** They're, they're—the one on the right is the Air Medal. The one in the middle, the purple one is the Purple Heart, the other is the Combat—I don't have the metal but I have the bar with five little stars on it, but I don't have the actual medal. If I went back to the Army I could probably claim one. They'd send me one. And there might be—I—you see because I was out before the war was over there were several other missions, there were several other medals—there was one called—I forget what they were all called. There were—They issued everybody a medal for—it was a participation medal for if you participated in World War II you got a medal. And there are several others. Which are probably in the records, but I never received them.

**ELDER:** And is that a picture of the plane?

**DIETRICH:** That's a watercolor done by my son. My son did that. It looks like a photograph, doesn't it?

**ELDER:** It does.

**DIETRICH:** It does. That's a watercolor that he did. And that was our—the checkerboard tail and the black diamond on the top and the checkerboard tail was our insignia on the plane. You could tell that was the 459<sup>th</sup> if it had a checkerboard tail.

**ELDER:** And did you paint names on them?

**DIETRICH:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. Let me see—I'll find the right book here and I'll show you my favorite plane. It's not the one we got shot down in—lemme see if I can find her. ... I have a copy of the "Pathfinder." This was our "Pathfinder" which we called the "Pathfinder" because this was our paper that they issued in Italy. Every once a month the group would send out a little newspaper. And give it to everybody. And we have since taken the name—this was an original—this one came from Italy that was issued. Got this one from Italy. And it's very—look at that. ... I thought my pilot's picture was in here. ... Maybe it is but I can't find it right now. ... Here's some of the places we bombed. You wanna look closer at it. Here's where our base was, down here. And these are—the bombs all show where our missions went.

**ELDER:** Was that in the "Pathfinder"?

**DIETRICH:** This is part of the "Pathfinder." Yeah. Part of the original "Pathfinder." I've got a – I've got another copy of it that was reprinted, but I brought this copy of it home with me from overseas. That's why it's so—that's why it's all apart. ... I'm going the wrong way. I want to go this way ... Here's my pilot. Sid Ruff. My pilot. I don't have pictures of all the crew, I don't think. I don't have pictures of all the crew. ... And there's our dog. Dog, dog, dog... Where—I'm looking for the—oh, here. The plane we flew quite a few missions in was called "Hot Shottsie." And Hot Shottsie wore a hat, a bandanna, a gun belt, and boots. That's all she had on. (Laughs.) That's all Hot Shottsie had on. I might have a bigger picture of Hot

Shottsie around here somewhere. ... There's our bombardier. There, she's painted on the plane, see her? Before I got to the group, before I got overseas, our group got a Presidential citation for one of the bomb raids they made. And here are pictures of the bombs. There was an aircraft factory in a place called Badbaslo, in Germany. And there's the bombs just being let out of the plane. You can see the whole factory's still there. And then you see 'em starting to hit—bing, bing, bing, and afterwards the reconnaissance photo shows nothing left. They dropped—the whole group dropped all their bombs in about a—I don't know—however big that area is—maybe 25, 30 acres. And that practically never happened with a bomber. If this was your target, half of 'em went over here, half of 'em went over here, and a few hit the target, every time. (Laughs.) ... Lemme see, what else is in here—I—I'm not—I had—there's a blue ribbon you can wear—there's a blue bar you can wear on your uniform. But I wasn't in the group at the time, so I wasn't entitled to it. Now here's—this is what our camp looked like. Tents. We lived in tents like this.

**ELDER:** And how many men were in a tent?

**DIETRICH:** Ten. Well, no, I guess, well, it depends. When we first went over, there were six of us, six enlisted men. There were six of us in a tent. And you could get—it could sleep as many as ten. And if a whole row—first we were in an olive grove, when we first went over. They put us in an olive grove with olive trees all around. And then later on they moved us to an open field. And—oh, here, here's—this is our tail gunner, Bill Rogers. He was the one the jumped out of the plane. He—get him?

**RIKKI DeMARCO:** Um-hmm.

**DIETRICH:** He's the guy that jumped out. ... Oh, there's a better picture of Hot Shottsie. You can really see her there. Focus in on Hot Shottsie. That's not the plane we got shot down in, but we flew quite a few missions in Hot Shottsie. ...

**ELDER:** Did you name her?

**DIETRICH:** Oh, no, no. It was – we didn't have – we, we trained as a crew in Colorado Springs, Colorado. And then we went to Lincoln, Nebraska, the air base in Lincoln, Nebraska, and picked up a brand-new B-24 and flew it to, to Maine or New Hampshire. To an air base in New Hampshire, and then up to Goose Bay, Newfoundland, the next day. And from Goose Bay, Newfoundland, when most of our crew had never seen the ocean, (laughs) we flew the plane to the Azores the next day.

**ELDER:** They were from New Jersey and they'd never seen the ocean?

**DIETRICH:** No, they weren't from New Jersey. I was the only one from New Jersey. They were from—my pilot was from Georgia, my copilot was from Raleigh-Durham, from Raleigh somewhere, I don't remember where—the other waist gunner was from Wisconsin—he was a beautiful ice skater. He could do—he was a figure skater. He could really ice skate. Do all kinds of tricks on his—in a cold country up there—and where was I? Oh, yeah. We went to the Azores, then we flew to Marrakech in North Africa. I don't know what country that's in, but to the west coast of Africa. And then we flew up to the coast on the Mediterranean. To a town up there, and then took the plane over, the next day took the plane over to Italy. And landed at another base and we'd already painted—I don't have a picture of it, but my buddy from Wisconsin was an artist, he's also an artist, and he'd drawn a beautiful girl—picture—body on the front of the plane. But we had to leave that—we left our plane at another air base

and got on a truck and went to the 459<sup>th</sup>. We were all disappointed. (Laughs.) We couldn't take our plane with us. We left it.

**ELDER:** So what positions are there in a plane?

**DIETRICH:** Well, there's pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator—we didn't always have a navigator, sometimes, didn't always have a navigator, bombardier's another position, navigator, and then nose gunner, tail gunner, top turret, bottom turret, waist gunner. Two waist gunners. There's six enlisted men, four officers—normal crew. You can see the positions there if you look at the B-24. Not, not, not, not those up there. Those up there are real old models. In fact, I don't think we even had any of those that old in our group. Here's-- the ball turret gunner hangs out the bottom of the plane, see him? Then he's only in here—in the B-24 that retracts up when you land—goes up inside the plane. But he's hanging down there with nothing—he don't see anything but the ground when he's in the ball turret. (Laughs.) He can't see the airplane. ... And that's—that statue over there—that's the way we—when we first went over, they were the clothing—they were the clothing we wore to fly. Lamb's wool jackets, pants, boots, gloves, helmet, and then after a while they issued us—maybe put it somewhere else to get a better picture of it. ... The only thing wrong with this is the parachute. We didn't have--The pilots wore seat chutes. They sat on their parachutes. That's what that is. That's one you sit on. But we wore a chest chute which was detachable. You—it just snapped on to your—you wore the harness all the time, but the parachute you just snapped on if you needed it.

**ELDER:** You wore it like here?

**DIETRICH:** Yeah, it would be like—there was two hooks and you would snap it on your chest like that. In fact, you had to have one like that because in the B-24 if you went from the front

of the plane to the back of the plane you had to go through the bomb bay, and the bomb bay—the beams in the bomb bay were about sixteen inches apart. That's how far they were-- and a little tiny catwalk about twelve inches that went up this way because what they were the bomb racks, and you had to go between them. So if you wore the chest chute on your chest you could not walk through the catwalk. You wouldn't fit. So you had to take it off and hold it in your hand to get from the front of the plane to the back. And the main problem was that the bomb bay doors were like that desktop—that roll top desk over there. I forget what they call that stuff but they were on a track, and they go up the side of the plane, and ten pounds of weight on them would knock them off the track. So if you stepped on them, the bomb bay doors would open.

**ELDER:** Not good.

**DIETRICH:** Not good. If you stepped on them, the bomb bay doors would open and you'd fall right out. In fact one time we couldn't get the bomb bay doors open. They wouldn't open. They'd got moisture in the tracks and were frozen, of course when you get up to 20,000 feet the temperature's like forty degrees below zero, so if you get any water in the track, the bomb bay doors freeze. So you just drop a bomb—drop the bombs right through--the bombs just go right through -- knock the doors off the track. And you go out, and then you can't close them. They just hang on the side of the plane, loose. Till you get home. And then it gets cold in the back of the plane. 'Cause the wind's coming through at 150 miles an hour. It's forty below, and I have frostbitten toes to prove it. To get back to the suits, after a while they issued us new nylon, green nylon--nylon jackets that were fur-lined. Not natural fur, they were nylon or something, manufactured fur, and then heated suits like long underwear, like a set of long underwear you climbed into, and you plugged it into a plug on the plane. And your gloves

were heated, your boots were heated, and it made it much easier to—when they weighed— they only weighed about one quarter as much as those fur—it was much easier to move around. They weren't nearly as heavy or thick. So it was much better. But you had to stay plugged in if you wanted to stay warm. Of course you had to stay plugged in anyway. You had to keep your oxygen plugged in at 20,000 feet. 'Cause you lasted about 30 seconds if your oxygen came loose. Thirty seconds to a minute, so you better get back on it again.

**ELDER:** So you didn't have a canister of oxygen?

**DIETRICH:** Well, we had 'em, yeah. If you had to move from the front of the plane to the back or move around, we would unplug from the wall and plug into a canister. ... And you wouldn't go from the front of the plane to the back at 20,000 feet unless you had to.  
(Laughs.) It had to be reason for doing it.

**ELDER:** So as a technical sergeant what did you—you said you were a radio operator?

**DIETRICH:** Radio operator and gunner. That's all. That's all I did.

**ELDER:** So there wasn't anything technical? You didn't have to fix the plane?

**DIETRICH:** No, nope, no. You had to be able to strip your fifty-caliber machine gun with your flying gloves on. With mittens on. You had to be able to take it apart and put it back together with mittens on. That was one of the tests they give you. And of course I had to keep up with my radio. We were always going to radio school. Continually. Whenever we had a day off we'd have classes or practice our code. We used Morse Code most of the time. I've forgotten most of that.

**ELDER:** That's—

**DIETRICH:** That's it? OK, all right. I might have more to show you here, though.

**ELDER:** Okay.



**DIETRICH:** Lemme see. ... Oh. This is what – the All-American. This is the inside of the--this is what the inside of a B-24 looks like, with the gun sticking out the waist window. That was my position right there in the plane. There's an oxygen tank. And I don't have any idea what that is. ... But this is the All-American when it visited Greenville. I got a congratulations from the mayor, card from the mayor. I remember the day he came, we had to stand in the rain and greet the crew. (Laughs.) Nancy Jenkins had to stand in the rain for about half an hour while the plane landed. There it is taxiing up. The ground was wet. The All American is the only one—the only B-24 still flying. It's the only one left. And the Smithsonian would love to have it. Lemme see what else. Oh there—there's Mayor Garner and I—is it? Yeah. I think that's Les Garner, and then my granddaughter and I flew from Kinston—it was in Kinston one time—we flew from Kinston to Raleigh-Durham. And there she is standing at the—at the window, and there's the oxygen tank, and there she is riding, she rode with us to Raleigh-Durham. When we got to Raleigh-Durham, we saw a sight that in those days was top secret. The B-22 Rotorwing. Have you ever seen one of those? It's a Marine plane. It's vertical take-off. Takes off straight up like a helicopter, and then the engines tip over and then it flies 250 miles an hour like an airplane. It'll carry about twenty people. In about ten years the Marines won't have any more helicopters. They'll have all these. This can take off straight up and down, or it can take off like a regular plane. We went to Raleigh-Durham, and while we were standing around after we got out of the plane we heard this funny noise. It makes a terrible sound, this thing. It's a noisy thing. And it flew around and landed right along side of us. Parked right along side us. It's called an Osprey. ... These are—I think these are just...

**END OF TAPE.**

