

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Melvin Price interview

Conducted by Adina Langer

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Transcribed by Surabhi Ganguly

Bio-note:

Melvin Price, born on January 23rd, 1926, in Dunkirk, New York, grew up during the Great Depression. His father worked at the American Locomotive Company, while his mother took care of the household. He had an older brother who served in the Field Artillery Army and a sister who recently passed away. During his childhood, Melvin's family faced financial challenges due to the economic downturn, experiencing firsthand the effects of rationing during World War II. Despite the hardships, Melvin cherished moments of leisure, such as swimming in Lake Erie near his home and spending time with friends. From a young age, Melvin was captivated by aviation and dreamed of flying. His interest led him to take a ride in a Ford Tri-Motor plane at the age of 15. After graduating as valedictorian from high school, he applied for aviation cadet training but ended up pursuing a different path in the military. Melvin underwent basic training at an Air Force base and then attended radio mechanic school, where he learned Morse code and radio mechanics. Despite initially aspiring for aviation training, he graduated as a radio operator and was assigned to a B-29 bomber crew during World War II. As a radar operator on a B-29 bomber, Melvin underwent rigorous training in the United States, including flying practice missions and familiarizing himself with the aircraft's components and crew responsibilities. He was later stationed in the Pacific Ocean on the island of Tinian, with stopovers on Guam, Kwajalein, and Johnston Island. Life in the Pacific presented numerous challenges, including harsh living conditions characterized by extreme heat, limited beach access, and the constant presence of sharks. Melvin also faced personal concerns related to flying, including engine malfunctions and perilous landings. After the war, Melvin married Marie, with whom he had three children. He transitioned to civilian life, working as a planning engineer, then senior manager at Bethlehem Steel until his retirement. Throughout his post-war years, Melvin shared his wartime experiences with ROTC students, emphasizing the importance of remembering World War II sacrifices and the enduring value of freedom.

Full Transcript:

Interviewer (00:00:00) - Today is December 6th, 2023. And my name is Adina Langer. I am a curator and oral historian at the museum of history and Holocaust education at Kennesaw state university in Georgia. And I'm here today at the home of Melvin Price, who will share his memories of serving in the army air corps during World War II. So can we please start, can you state your full name?

Melvin Price (00:00:30) - My name is Melvin Price. And normally I go by the name of Mel, which I prefer, and that is what I'm really known as.

Interviewer (00:00:40) - Alright, so Mel. And do you agree to this interview?

Melvin Price (00:00:44) - Yes, I totally agree to it. The words that I will tell you are strictly my own words.

Interviewer (00:00:54) - Absolutely. Thank you. Can you please tell me when and where you were born?

Melvin Price (00:01:01) - I was born January 23rd, 1926, which means that I'm 97 years old and, I'm 50 days away from being 98 years old. I was born in Dunkirk, New York, which is on the shoreline of Lake Erie. It's actually about halfway between Erie, Pennsylvania and Buffalo, New York. Dunkirk has a great harbor and it accommodated many things because of the harbor.

Interviewer (00:01:43) - And what was your neighborhood like where you grew up?

Melvin Price (00:01:48) - Our neighborhood was strictly blue collar. There were many factories and just about everybody had families with plenty of places to work. Dunkirk at the time had a population of 23,000. And it was mainly industrial business. The largest one was the American Locomotive Company and then there was also **Van Raalte**, which manufactured leather women's gloves of high quality and underwear. And then there was a canning factory, also a plant that manufactured shovels, and a smaller one that manufactured valves. There was also another steel plant in Dunkirk of a smaller size, but they specialized in special steel.

Interviewer (00:02:56) - And what were your parents' names?

Melvin Price (00:02:59) - My father's name was Martin. My mother's name was Helen.

Interviewer (00:03:05) - What kind of work did they do?

Melvin Price (00:03:07)- What's that again?

Interviewer (00:03:08) - What kind of work did they do?

Melvin Price (00:03:09) - Oh, my father worked at the American Locomotive Company. And, and this company manufactured steam locomotives, from the very beginning until the end. And once it was completed it, it was sent out to the railroads. My father's job was in charge of a pattern shop. The way this is, there were pattern makers which would make wooden simulations of what was needed into a metallic state for an engine and these pattern makers would manufacture this and also make core boxes, which would be the interior, rather than have a solid object. They would send these patterns out to different foundries to be cast or simulated in other forms. And then the patterns would be in storage, it would be a huge building. And my father was in charge

of all of the storage and it was amazing how he could recall exactly where one particular pattern was called for. And it had an elevator and they would find a pattern and ship it to the foundry for manufacturing. And my mother, she was a homemaker, which was typical in the times, in the times we're talking about, were the 1930s.

Interviewer (00:05:00) - Did you have any siblings?

Melvin Price (00:05:02) - Yes, I did. I had an older brother, and I was a middle child, and I had a sister. My brother did suffer cancer and died at an early age, and I recently lost my sister just about a year and a half ago.

Interviewer (00:05:23) - What were their names?

Melvin Price (00:05:25) - My brother's name was Marshall, and my sister's name was Mildred.

Interviewer (00:05:33) - It sounds like your family liked the letter M.

Melvin Price (00:05:36) - It, it, it seems as though we were all M.P =Martin Price

Interviewer (00:05:45) - Yeah.

Melvin Price (00:05:46) [continuation] - and all the way down the line. I don't know if that's a coincidence or if it's just something that happened.

Interviewer (00:05:52) - Yeah.

Melvin Price (00:05:53) [continuation] - My brother was drafted, by the way, and he served just about six months in the field artillery and was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. And for some unknown reason that I don't really know he got a medical discharge and he was sent back home.

Interviewer (00:06:19) - So before we get into the war, I want to go back. Do you have a sense for how the Great Depression impacted your family or your community?

Melvin Price (00:06:32) - The impression—.

Interviewer (00:06:35) - The depression. So the stock market crashed and—.

Melvin Price (00:06:38) - Yes

Interviewer (00:06:39) - Yeah.

Melvin Price (00:06:40) - The depression had a devastating effect on all of the families because most of the workers were dependent on manufacturing products. And families really struggled.

The families were too proud to apply for welfare. And they tried to do this on their own. Our family is one of the lucky ones because my father was able to work possibly about three days a week. But, but that's not the case of my wife, Marie. From now on, if I refer to my wife, I will use the name Marie. Okay, well, she did tell me about her family. She had a sister and three brothers and, and her father was laid off. He also worked in the American Locomotive Company. And she told me many times that they really had nothing to eat. But the older brother was a carpenter, and he was able to find various jobs and make enough money to support the family. And that really stuck with her. In fact, it carried on into our marriage. And because of the hardship in her teen years she was very careful on how we spent our money. And thankful for her that I am in the position I am in today.

Interviewer (00:08:38) - Do you remember dealing with rationing, ration coupons, or things like that?

Melvin Price (00:08:45) - Yes! Rationing started early and the rationing was, people that owned cars would get a ration stamp of five gallons per week. And of course, there was a black market also where there were counterfeit just the way it is today. But, for the most part, there was quite a bit of honesty and as far as other products go, I believe that maybe once a month you would get a coupon for sugar and butter and a few other items, but it wasn't very much. It was more or less basic.

Interviewer (00:09:40) - Were your, was your family fond of President Roosevelt? It wasn't a question I had previously asked, but I'm curious, given the depression and the neighborhood, what were, were they fond of President Roosevelt?

Melvin Price (00:09:56) - I don't know about the neighborhood, but I really think that our country is really lucky and blessed that Roosevelt was our president. Apparently, others did too, because I believe he was elected for a third term, which is unprecedented, because it's not the case anymore. But even though he was an invalid he did do many things, like meeting with partnership countries during the war and of course our allies.

Interviewer (00:10:53) - Yeah, so, and he, yeah, he, he did a lot with trying to fix the depression, too.

Melvin Price (00:11:00) - I had the highest respect for, for Mr. Roosevelt.

Interviewer (00:11:05) - So going back to your family, was religion important to your family?

Melvin Price (00:11:10) - Religion was very important. It was under the leadership of my father. I'm a Roman Catholic and it was mandatory that we attend the Sunday Mass. We would walk to church about five or six blocks, and for some reason we always went about a half hour early. And we would sit in the pews, the kids would go in first. My mother and my father would sit on the aisle. And as soon as we got seated, and bear in mind this was a half hour before mass started, he had a little black prayer book and he would pray all the time and at that time, it didn't really

seem to have any bearing on me, but then he did tell the story, of course my father is a World War I veteran and he more or less kind of kept things to himself of what he did, but one story that he did tell was that they were over in France and they were sitting on a bench eating their chow. He was there with eight others and a German shell came in and exploded nearby and killed all eight of them, and he was the sole survivor. So, I kind of think, probably a Divine Providence played a major part. And it was so strongly embedded in his mind that, that somebody was looking after him. But I didn't realize this until later on in the years. That was the most beautiful part of my life. We had great friends and in the 30s we had to improvise things. And as I mentioned before, Dunkirk is on the shore of Lake Erie and our house was only a few houses away from the shoreline. The most important thing was swimming. And we would go as much as possible throughout the day to swim almost every day, and up north the water temperature never reached higher than 66 degrees. And it was okay. The first dive was the worst. But our main objective was what we called a table rock. It was quite a distance from shore and those that could swim would swim out and try to find the rock. And once the rock was found, well then, everybody came to the rock, and it only had about a foot of water over the top of it. But for some of those that could not swim that great distance, there was another smaller rock, which we called a secondary rock, and those that weren't so proficient at swimming would swim for that rock and then take a break and then continue on. But that was a daily occurrence for us. And other things that we did if we were not swimming, well the way the shoreline is in Dunkirk, there's shale at the bottom of the water and it extends at a great distance. And what we would do is to wade out probably about six inches of water, and we would peel off a bit of shale, trying to get it as big as possible, probably like the size of a dinner plate or not. And then what we do is go back on shore, and then we would skim it out. And I'm sure that you've seen all of this before, but we used to do the shale thing. Well, by being exposed day after day to the sun, we used to get sunburned. And after about three days, our skin would start to peel. And then we'd have to take a break a day or two, until our skin would thoroughly peel off. And then what we would do is repeat it. Do the same thing again. But of course, today we know that it's a cause of cancer. But at the time cancer was unknown. And in the evening, we would always go to the shoreline. And like every shoreline, there's a lot of driftwood and what we do is build a little fire. And usually on many occasions, we would hunt out one particular type of wood. And we would break it in half and make it about the length of a cigarette. And what we would do, we would blow in it. And if we could actually blow through it, well then what we would do is put the tip into the fire, and we would take a couple puffs. But it was not a big deal at all to do that. Just I haven't got a clue as to why we did that but, I've never been a smoker. I've never smoked a cigarette at all in my life. Another very important thing is that, once we had the fire going, what each one of us would do would get a potato. And we would take it to the fire, and once the fire died down into embers, we would toss in the potato. And when it turned real black, well then we would break it open and eat it. Well yeah, potato sounds like a simple thing, but it was not so. Many of my friends would want to do this, but they had no potatoes. So, I would ask my mother, is there any chance that we could give him a potato? She always did that. Everybody had a potato.

Interviewer (00:18:56) - That's wonderful.

Melvin Price (00:18:57) - In the wintertime there's no swimming and it's a little bit too cold to do this fire thing, but Lake Erie is the shallowest lake of them all and, and it freezes quickly. Well, in the springtime, once the ice had breaking up and we got clear water, what we would do is to go to the shoreline and look for an iceberg, a round piece of frozen ice, probably eight to ten feet in diameter, and we would have sticks. And what we would do is to jump on these icebergs and pull ourselves away into deep water. And that was great fun to do that.

Interviewer (00:19:58) - It's funny, I was just going to ask you about whether the lake froze, and if you remember it. Did you ever walk out on the frozen lake?

Melvin Price (00:20:06) - Yes, we did. In fact, I look back and see and think, wow we shouldn't have done that as kids, but what we would do is to go out there and Dunkirk has a break wall and the object was to go from the shoreline to the break wall. Well near the break wall, we're walking on the ice and the ice is waving back and forth, and we called it rubber ice. But I look back now thinking that if we ever fell through, it would be impossible to get back. But it was only spots in the ice that was so thin was usually almost like green in color. So, we knew what to expect, but for some reason we would like to go on that for a short distance and then scoot back.

Interviewer (00:21:22) - Pretty daring kids. So, do you have any early memories of aviation? Of flying?

Melvin Price (00:21:36) - I always did. When I was about 15, I, I used to see these planes flying around and I was rather fascinated by that and I was thinking, you know, I want to do that someday. And also, occasionally there were blimps that came across the area. And I have no idea what the blimps were, but they were based in Akron, Ohio. And since I had this desire to try to fly—well, I peddled papers, by the way, and probably made 50 cents a week. And we did get an allowance in the family. Our allowance was 5 cents a week and sometimes it was missed. But there was a plane that was going to come to Dunkirk. It's a Ford Tri Motor. It's a German type of plane and it was gonna offer rides and soon as I heard that, well then that's, I'm gonna do this thing. Well, it was very capable of taking off in short runways and landing in short runways and what this was would just a grassy strip, but, but the length was enough to make the aircraft airborne. Well the price was 50 cents but that was big money. But I had the money, so I went for a ride and it lasted probably about 15 minutes. It would take off, circle the city, go over the lake, and then come back. And after experiencing that, I was still in high school, I heard about the aviation cadet training. And I figured that this is one thing I wanted to do. I graduated valedictorian in my high school class. And I said, I'm going to have a complete shoe in on this thing. Aviation cadet training would be a pilot, copilot, flight engineer, bombardier, or navigator. And I felt that I would be able to do all of these things. But of course, it didn't turn out that way.

Interviewer (00:24:28) - So we'll get to that. Just going back to flying, what did you love about flying?

Melvin Price (00:24:36) - I don't know. It's just, you're up in the air, you're breathing a different type of air and you can see things on the ground that possibly you would never see.

Interviewer (00:24:53) - How did your family get the news when you were growing up?

Melvin Price (00:24:57) - My father had a radio. And of course, we also took the daily newspaper. But I never listened much to the news. Of course, my father did listen to the news. And particularly on a Sunday he would put on Bishop and hear Fulton Sheen, I believe the name was. He was the bishop, and he would speak religiously for a full hour. And my father every Sunday would listen to him. But, as far as us kids listening in, we knew that that there's a conflict going on and it didn't really affect us too much.

Interviewer (00:26:05) - What do you remember about hearing about the attack on Pearl Harbor specifically?

Melvin Price (00:26:12) - That I thought was such a cowardly act on the part of the Japanese because prior to this, envoys we're still in Washington talking peace. And at the same time the Japanese were preparing a fleet of aircraft carriers and other vessels to do a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. And that is when I really got glued to the radio. Especially when President Roosevelt said that this day will live in infamy. And even today that one simple phrase sticks strongly.

Interviewer (00:27:10) - You were in high school at this time, right?

Melvin Price (00:27:13) - Yes, I was.

Interviewer (00:27:14) - What was the name of your high school?

Melvin Price (00:27:17) - Dunkirk Industrial High School.

Interviewer (00:27:20) - Did your high school participate in any activities to support the war effort?

Melvin price (00:27:27) - Yes, we did. Of course, there were bond drives and people were asked to buy war bonds. And in my senior year for some reason, we formed a drum corps, and the instructor was from an adjacent city Fredonia, which was also a music college and I don't know if it was, I don't think it was a student, I think it was one of the teachers. She would come and we formed a Drum and Bugle Corps. Well, there was a bond drive going on. And what they did was to bring in a captured two-man Japanese submarine and it was on a trailer. And our job was to dress up, go out in the street, and then escort this to the square in the city of Dunkirk. And at that time there were speeches made to try to increase the amount of participation in people buying, war bonds. But that probably was just about the only one, but truthfully, it was big time. You know, to parade down the street, it was probably about maybe a two-mile run.

Interviewer (00:29:13) - Wow. So, you mentioned your interest in flight cadet school. What did you know about the different branches of the military when you were in high school?

Melvin Price (00:29:27) - I don't know. I was very familiar with, with, with Army, Air Corps and Navy, and I didn't know much about Marines. But I know one thing for sure is that I would never want to, to go into the Navy. But as far as far as Army and Air Corps goes that that was fine. But I would like to tell a story here. Marie's brother was in the Corps of Engineers and he trained in the States and then his assignment was to go to Europe. So, they boarded a transport plane, which is a C-54, which holds possibly about maybe 125, maybe 150 individuals. And when they were on the flight to Europe, they passed over Newfoundland and the plane crashed. And it crashed into the mountains, and everybody on board was killed except two people, and one of them was Marie's brother. And they were both severely injured. And being in a northern area, they needed to start a fire. And I don't know if he was a smoker or not, but what he did was open his wallet and pull out a couple dollar bills and crumple them and start a fire. And this happened at night and then in the daytime, he and his companion crawled through the forest area and finally found, a roadway. And they laid there a while until a passerby found them, picked them up, and put them in a hospital. And he was in a hospital in Newfoundland for a short period of time, but then he was returned to the States, and he spent, I believe about six months in a hospital because he suffered severe back injuries. He was discharged, being a 100 percent disabled.

Interviewer (00:32:13) - Wow. So, making the decision about which branch to apply for, did your father give you any advice about the military or about the possibility of going overseas before you joined?

Melvin Price (00:32:30) - No, he never really talked about that too much, but his family was high in the military. He had a brother that also served in the military. And he wasn't very familiar with this aviation cadet training either. But when we talked about this, he seemed to be okay. Because he did seven years in Europe, in all the major campaigns. And he did his bit for the country. And he thought it was probably time for me to do something, too. But he was not against this at all. There is a possibility that I could have been drafted. And, of course, being drafted, who knows where I would go. But since I had an opportunity as applying for cadet training. But, prior to this, I was preparing myself for cadet training. The country formed a, a, a civil air patrol. I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but it was civilian pilots that would patrol the coastline and their private planes looking for possibly the enemy being maybe submarines or, whatever and we did drill. It was almost like military to civil air patrol. We had uniforms and once a week we would go to an armory and we would drill there. I kind of thought, well I I got to the rank of corporal, and I kind of thought probably that, that this might help me a little bit. But, once I got in, nothing.

Interviewer (00:34:51) - So tell me what happened with the training? So you mentioned that you didn't get into the aviation cadet training as you had hoped. What, where did you end up doing your training?

Melvin Price (00:35:08) - I was 17 when I was in this cadet training program. And so when I turned 18, a few months later, I got a notice to report for duty. What I did was to board a train, and we went to a military base in Long Island. And it was a mixture of just about everybody. And the Air Corps, not necessarily people in my program were sent to Biloxi, Mississippi. And in Biloxi, Mississippi, we had a mixture of just about everybody. It was an Air Force base, Kessler **Field**,

which is still active today. And while being there, we were tested in various different avenues and one of them was to go into a pressure chamber with an oxygen mask and there were instructors also in there. And what they would do is to simulate an altitude of 12,000 feet. And if you felt like you were passing out, what you had to do was to put your oxygen mask on. And in a few cases, some of those actually passed out and couldn't do it. So immediately they were depressurized and the instructors would attend to them. And we were also tested for Morse code prior to this. All I knew was that Morse code was just dots and dashes. I didn't have any idea as to what certain dots or dashes would mean as far as a letter goes. And I did know that SOS was three dots, three dashes, and then three dots. That is the only thing I knew. But as far as all of the alphabet, I had no idea. Well, we were tested, two signals would be sent out, and they were very similar to one another. And you had to determine whether they were yes or no, being similar. And that lasted quite a while. And also, we had coordination testing where there would be held like two sticks in there on a wire, and they would be at a distance, and the object was to try to get them so they would be extremely parallel. That way you could tell if you were able to coordinate different objects and different lengths. And we also went on a 25-mile hike. We were all together. And at the very end, I went before a psychiatrist. And he would interview me probably to see what kind of individual I was. And at the time, I'd got it made, because I feel that I've passed all these things. Well, at the very end of basic training, here comes the news. Nobody out of all the other soldiers went to cadet training. And those that scored the highest were sent to radio operator school. Yeah, you know, those with the lowest scores were sent to gunnery schools or else possibly any other area of service. From Biloxi, Mississippi, I was told I was going to radio school. And we went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It was in the wintertime. And in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, we had classrooms and started to identify dots and dashes. And we started like four words per minute. They would send out, dots and dashes and well prior to that, we were told like three dashes would be an O or an A would be a dot and a dash and, and so on. But everything was, was very close, especially the dots. Like an H is four dots. And to hear three dots and then hear four dots, it was really hard to decipher what it was. But we started at four words per minute. And we had a classroom possibly about maybe 15, 20. And there were three instructors, and they were civilians, and they were extremely good people. They wanted to hammer this into our mind. My understanding is that younger people are able to capture new events rather than somebody say 30 years old. It's true today. So after doing four words per minute there is no way that I've been able to do this thing. The object was to do 25 words per minute. And I said there's absolutely no way. Well, it wasn't just Morse code, you couldn't sit there all day and be hammered with all the dots and dashes. So, I was actually a radio operator mechanic and the mechanical part of this was to actually build a receiver. And the receiver in them days was very simple. You had a radio tube, you had a transformer, a condenser, and a resistor. And what you had to do was determine from a schematic exactly how to do this. And we were able to build a radio and then tune it in and get a station.

Interviewer (00:43:13) - That's amazing. So, when you were sent to Radio Operator School, how did you feel about that? What were you feeling at that time?

Melvin Price (00:43:22) - Well, I was highly disappointed, naturally, because it's not what I spent years building up to. And one thing I can say is that well previously I said that nobody went to

Aviation Cadet Training, but I was friendly with an elder man, and he was a flight instructor, and even he was not assigned to this. Apparently as I look at it today, there was a shortage of radio operators. And even today I feel that to be able to send out words by dots and dashes and also to interpolate them and to send to you would be much harder to learn than say a navigator, bombardier or a pilot. A pilot can learn to fly in about two months. And a bombardier, I believe after about one month of training to familiarize yourself with the Norton bomb site, you could really do the job. The navigator, probably a little bit different. You might need to have a little bit of moxie to do that. But I spent nine months training as a radio operator and mechanic. And after being able to pass four words per minute, we would go to six words per minute. And then eight and ten, and finally get up to a higher number. And it's really surprising, how you could accomplish this. As I mentioned, the instructors were extremely good. They were highly concerned. They wanted that student to reach the ultimate 25 words per minute. Now, I do know that some couldn't do it. And I don't know what happened to them. Possibly they were dispatched to an aircraft carrier, even though they weren't reaching the required 25 words. One final thing was that, well of course we're sitting in a quiet classroom and then, the final thing was to board a training plane. It held about ten proficient radio operators and the plane would fly around and we would contact the ground station, they would call us back and then the most important part of being an operator is to have the ground station know exactly where you are at all times. But I did reach that and then once I graduated from that I was assigned for training in Pyote, Texas, and it took—well we had to leave then and that they said that you need to report in 14 days to Pyote, Texas from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. So, what I did, I went back home and this is the time when I proposed to Marie for marriage and and I really loved her mother. I really did. And I always talked to her. And her older sister was always throwing wisecracks at me when I was dating prior to the war. Well, you know a woman, you know, she's never on time. Her date is seven o'clock. No wait, she's upstairs preparing herself. Well then [laughs] at one time her sister Anna said to me, she's not ready yet, so what do you say that you and I go out together? [laughs] but she was married. Her husband was in the infantry. But it was just a joke. But during this period, they knew that I was going to Texas and I said goodbye to Anna, and Anna said to me, you know, I'm never gonna see you again. And that kind of struck me a little bit because you know what she meant. then I did go to Pyote, Texas and this is where we formed our crew.

Interviewer (00:49:01) - So before we talk about the crew, can you just lay out what were the, what were the duties of a radio operator? You mentioned getting the Morse code and sending the Morse code. Was that the primary duty? What were the duties?

Melvin Price (00:49:18)- Well, the primary thing is to notify the ground station exactly where you are. That was the primary thing. And then overseas, it was to monitor the receiver in case there was a change of target. Change of target could, well usually, from Tinian to Japan, there were two weather fronts. And some of them were rough. And also targets in Japan, there's a primary one and a secondary one. If a wave of bombers went before one of your primary targets and had great ground resistance, well then we were told to go to the secondary target. And of course there were two things right there. And also to be able to find our position like in the states, overseas were different because nobody needed to know where you were going, because the Japanese were picking up all these radio signals. And by the way, the dots and dashes were all coded. It

wasn't plain English, like have a good day. No way. It would be dots and dashes to have a good day or whatever. But if our navigator lost track of where we were, that was his responsibility also to know where we are, and he would get the position in longitude and latitude and then send it to me. And we were side by side in the plane. And I would radio back to our base and tell them where we are.

Interviewer (00:51:45) - I see. So you mentioned you got to Texas and you got your crew assignment. So, was this when you found out what your unit would be in the Air Corps and who you'd be working with?

Interviewer (00:51:59) - Well we were totally in the dark. We had no idea; all we did was go from step to step. When we were in Pyote, Texas, that's the first time I saw a B-29. And I had no idea where B-29s were. Of course, it's a bomber, and apparently it was being used somewhere in this war. And our crew was assembled in and I feel that I'm one of the lucky ones, because our captain, I mean our pilot, he's called an airplane commander and he's the pilot. He was from Fort Worth, Texas. And the co-pilot was actually called the pilot. And then there was a flight engineer that was responsible for monitoring how the engines are functioning and also the hydraulics and the way we would operate the bomb bay doors and the landing gear and everything else, that was a very responsible job. The pilot did have some of them instruments, but not as much of the flight engineer. And as far as the bombardier goes, he didn't really have next to nothing to do except at the target area. And also, we had four gunners. There was a tail gunner, and he had twin 50 caliber machine guns plus a 30-millimeter cannon and then, on the right side of the plane and left side of the plane were gunners and there was like a little bubble where they could look out and have about 180 degrees vision. And the guns were controlled remotely, so that they did have a handheld device that they would be able to aim at a target and the turret with the guns would respond to whatever was there. And the main gunner was called Central Fire Control. He was in between both of these gunners, and he was sitting up on a pedestal and his head was up at the top of the plane in a dome. And he had 360 degrees of vision. And he was the master gunner. He could fire all of the guns in the plane, with the exception of the tail gunner. And the bombardier also was able to control one of the turrets in the front.

Interviewer (00:55:10) - What did you think the first time you saw a B-29?

Melvin Price (00:55:17) - I never saw anything like this. It was such a massive plane and the size of the propellers were something just about unbelievable. And as far as the inside goes, it wasn't too crowded. I've been in other smaller sized bombers, and it's really cramped. But there were plenty of room. And of course, the crew was almost shoulder to shoulder, and especially the navigator and I, we corresponded, you know, constantly. And it was an aircraft that was pressurized and also heated and it had a unique interior structure because all the other planes in the Army Air Force were not pressurized and the flight crews all had to wear heavy jackets all the time, but we would just have a simple flying suit and be real comfortable at any altitude.

Interviewer (00:56:48) - Tell me about the layout inside the plane? So where, where were all the different people?

Melvin Price (00:56:54) - Okay, well starting with the bombardier, he was at the nose of the plane. And at the nose of the plane, it's just loaded with windows. He had the best view. He could see everything that was going on. And the pilot, I mean, the airplane commander, who as I mentioned before, I was lucky to have them, all of the flight instructors wanted to be with him when we were training, but the B-29 was unfamiliar to him. But he did have a background of flying bombers. Prior to being assigned to assemble a crew for B-29's, he flew B-24's out of Australia. And his bombing raids were going north, Guadalcanal, New Guinea, and also Leyte in the Philippines. And he did have 25 missions. And what he would always do is save one bomb before our return. They passed over a Japanese ship and the bombardier bombed the ship and sunk it. He was highly decorated. But he had his personal reasons for wanting a second tour. He got his 25 missions. And 25 missions is really the magic number. If you reach 20, if, that's a big word, if you reach 25 missions, well then you can return to the States. And I'll review again, in the front area was the bombardier, airplane commander, pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, navigator, and me. In the back, and access to the back was a tunnel. And you'd have to more or less like swim through this tunnel, it was about 30 inches in diameter. And if you wanted to go from front to rear or rear to front, you'd have to go through this tunnel. And in the back, where the right scanner, left scanner, central fire control, tail gunner, and also a radio operator, I mean, radar operator.

Interviewer (00:59:45) - And all of these jobs, did they all have special equipment?

Melvin Price (01:00:01) - What's that again?

Interviewer (01:00:02) - Did all of these different positions operate special equipment?

Melvin Price (01:00:07) - Well, yes. But I was really surprised that the amount of equipment for a radio operator was almost similar to what we were seeing in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Apparently, they were preparing for B-29s in a course that we were never told.

Interviewer (01:00:38) - So tell me a little bit more about that equipment. What did your station look like inside the plane? What did the equipment look like inside the plane?

Melvin Price (01:00:49) - You mean as a radio operator?

Interviewer (01:00:52) - Mm hmm.

Melvin Price (01:00:58) - It was a large disk. And it was from ceiling to the floor with transmitters, and also a receiver, and also other objects, which I can't quite recall, but it was a tremendous responsibility.

Interviewer (00:01:22) - So you mentioned the importance too of the ground crew that serviced the plane. Do you want to tell me a little bit about those ground crews?

Melvin Price (01:01:30) - Well ground crews in the States were not as dedicated to the plane as those overseas. And they were a little bit sloppy in my estimation about maintaining the plane because almost every flight that we had involved some sort of malfunction. Many times they would have to shut down the the engine and feather it. I don't know if you know what feathering is but I will tell you what feathering is. Airplane propellers have a slight angle and as they rotate, kind of like weaves itself through the air and it pushes the plane. Well, if you need to shut down the engine, because of a fire or a malfunction of the engine, you would have to feather the propellers. So, by feathering, instead of it being like almost 90 degrees to the fuselage, you would make it parallel. Now, if you wouldn't do this, and the engine wasn't shut down, it would windmill. And it would exceed the normal rotation of an engine that was functioning abnormally and then it would disintegrate and blow up.

Interviewer (01:03:23) - So that sounds really important, that they would, that they did this maintenance.

Melvin Price (01:03:27) - Oh, yes.

Interviewer (01:03:28) - Yeah.

Melvin Price (01:03:29) - Yes. Well many times we kind of feathered the engines and then also had engine fires. Well, engine fires would be oil and also gasoline and it would be up to the operator that had monitored all of the engines. Flight engineer, that's what I'm trying to say. And it would be up to him to shut off the fuel and try to extinguish the fire. Well, the engine did have an extinguisher, which hardly ever worked. And if the fire was still pretty heavy the pilot would go into a nosedive and blow out the flame. And this was very common but we were told that once you get overseas, you're going to have a ground crew that is strictly devoted to the one aircraft. And it would be much different.

Interviewer (01:04:55) - So what do you remember about landing? What was, what was it like to land one of these planes?

Melvin Price (01:05:07) - You know, it's very strange that during training, there was a lot of training where the airplane commander would take off and land and then practice again and keep repeating. The strangest thing is that the bomb bays were always empty and he was flying an empty plane. Overseas you're not flying an empty plane. What you're doing is putting in 10,000, 12,000, 14,000 pounds of ordnance. And then I can't quite understand why they didn't put some dummies or something into the plane for that. And the Bombardier was also training. And Pyote, Texas is halfway in between El Paso and Fort Worth and it's all desert and there's oil wells. And there's a small town Stockton, Texas. There was a little building with a smokestack, and the object was for the bombardier to, it was a practice bomb. It, it wasn't nothing more than a a cylinder filled with sand, weighed about a hundred pounds and the object was to try to drop that bomb into the chimney. And I don't really know how efficient he was as a bombardier. And as far as the gunner go, there were training planes, fighters that they would attack us while we were training and then the gunners would use camera bombing, I mean camera shooting. And then—there were no blind

spots in this, by the way. And then they would show the film later on to show what the performance is for the gunners. Well, at one time, this one gunner is tracking the fighter, and what he's doing is he's still shooting, and he goes right across the wing of our plane [laughs]. In other words, he would have shot down our own plane.

Interviewer (01:08:02) - Great! So you were telling me about your crew. Can you tell me the name of your commander?

Melvin Price (01:08:09) - Yeah, Virgil Stevens. He was from Fort Worth, Texas, and he was a captain. And I'm extremely lucky to have them.

Interviewer (01:08:23) - And how many crew members were there total in your B-29?

Melvin Price (01:08:27) - 11. 11 crew members.

Interviewer (01:08:35) - And they all had different skills? They all brought their different skills. They all had separate training?

Melvin Price (01:08:40) - Oh, yes. And everybody had to be proficient. Virgil Stevens, who's gone through a war out of Australia, he wanted to make absolutely sure that every crew member was really up to par. He did monitor me real close. Well as I mentioned before we were in a classroom doing 25 words per minute. Well that's a nice quiet classroom. Well here comes a B-29, and I'm sitting in there and there's 4 engines, massive engines, 2,000 horsepower, 2 on each side, and the plane is rocking because of the engines. I could not do 25 words per minute. I could get as high as 20. And Virgil Stevens would be checking on the performance of his crew members. And he said to me one day, Mel, when are you going to get 25 words per minute? And I said, I will get it. I said, it's a little bit difficult, but I promise you I will get it. And I did. Also, part of the training, I'm not too sure about our navigator, if he was really the type of man that he was looking for, but anyway, he was there. One time we were flying at night and we were over New Mexico and the pilot radioed me that I need to find out where we are, the navigator couldn't do it for some reason. So, the way it is, the pilot would fly a steady course and there were ground stations that would be able to track you were, there were three of them. It's spaced 120 degrees apart and they would send out signals, after hearing my signal, and where the cross hairs came from the three, well then that was our position. And of course, then the pilot knew which direction he was going, so, so anyway, he could turn around and then return back to base. Our final training preposition in Pyote, Texas was to take a long flight in the States and what we did was to board the plane about mid-afternoon and it would be a 3000-mile flight, which is equivalent to the flight to Japan. And we still didn't know. I believe even the officers didn't know. So we flew to Rochester, Minnesota and we were struck by lightning a couple times. Well Rochester, Minnesota, I'm not sure about the mileage, but, It was beyond the length where I could send a signal to the ground station because our transmitters on board the plane were not as strong as what they were at the ground station. There was only a small antenna at the top of the plane. And it was sufficient for say, four or five hundred miles, where you could converse back and forth. The plane was outfitted with a trailing antenna and since I had to report being up in the northern states to the ground

station to tell them where we are, I would notify the airplane commander that I'm dropping a trailing antenna. Well a trailing antenna had a weight which resembled a pear and it would spool down, it would be about 200 feet long and that would be the antenna and it was extremely loud even in my receiver when I was sending, and then once my work was done, I would tell the captain that I'm bringing back the training antenna. From Rochester, Minnesota— by the way, we were struck by lightning twice, up in the air. It, it didn't really affect the plane, but it did rock and I know that I wasn't wearing a seatbelt and my head hit the ceiling of the plane, but from there we flew eastward to Cleveland and then our bombardiers objective on his flight was to camera bomb the blimp hangars in Akron, Ohio. Even today that's where the Goodyear Blimp is, the home port. he would do that and then we would return back to Texas. Well many times, some of these crews would more or less simulate a fake malfunction with a plane and make a landing say in Chicago or some nice city and then enjoy a little bit of life outside of the military. If, if that ever happened, they would have to repeat and do it again until they did the whole thing. And that was the last thing that we did there. But I probably said enough about training, but there is one incident that you're good to go.

Interviewer (01:16:17) - Mm-Hmm.

Melvin Price (01:16:18) - Okay. Well as we were flying well our left Gunner, he knew quite a bit about airplanes, not necessarily a B-29 and as we were flying in, in Texas, over the over the intercom, he told the pilot that he can smell fuel coming out of the bomb bay. So the pilot said, "Well go in the bomb bay and see if you can find out where the leakage is and make sure you have a parachute on. Well, I guess you probably already know the answer. But anyway, I'm going to keep on going. Well in the bomb bay there's a catwalk where you can walk around the entire bomb bay and he, he was reaching in some of the lines and then he radioed back to the captain that he couldn't find it. So what he said is that he's going to lay on the closed bomb bay doors and reach in for, for some of the fuel lines to see if there's any leakage and lo and behold, he pulled the wrong cord and opened the bomb bay and out he went. The rear gunner radioed the captain, Franz just fell out of the plane. So we were at about 12, 000 feet then and do you see a chute? and said, No, we can't see one. Well, finally, we saw his parachute and what our pilot did was to radio the base that he's lost a crew member, so he put the plane in a dive and he's flying over the top of the oil wells and he's circling, Franz, that was his name, circling him and then we see an ambulance come to pick him up. But he wasn't injured at all. We continued, it was nothing of importance, even though everything is important. So, when we got back to base, we come to our barracks and here Franz is sitting up on his bunk, really enjoying himself. And anybody that bails out, well, you know, normally we wear a pair of wings, which has a wing on each side and also a center. Well in his case, he would get half of a wing, and he could wear it. Well, what he did was to seek out who packed his parachute. There was a huge hangar and there were all women in there that would pack parachutes. So he got a box of candy and he went to meet this woman that packed his parachute.

Interviewer (01:19:58) - And did he meet her?

Melvin Price (01:20:02) - Yes. Yes.

Interviewer (01:20:04) - Did they hit it off?

Melvin Price (01:20:05) - No.No. [interviewer laughs] It worked out well. Well, after we finished this long flight of 3,000 miles, we were sent to Topeka, Kansas. Topeka, Kansas had an airfield, and that was a staging area. That is where we were equipped with all of our overseas equipment. And we still didn't know our destination. We were given a 45 caliber pistol, canteen, a survival knife, which I will show you later and also a medical kit, which contained two syringes of morphine. So, if you were injured, you could shoot yourself to kind of ease the pain. And we were issued an oxygen mask plus flying clothing. From there we went to San Francisco. And north of San Francisco is Hamilton Field and from there, we didn't stay very long, from there we boarded a C-54 transport plane and flew to Hawaii. And we only spent hardly an hour or two and actually to refuel and possibly a change of pilots. And then from there, our next stop was Johnston Island, which is nothing more than a little island with an airstrip. And it's only used to refuel aircraft that are in the air, not necessarily B-29s, but, but any other aircraft, could be Navy, whatever. And then from there we made a landing on Kwajalein. And that is when it really, really hit me. What in the world am I getting into?

Interviewer (01:22:32) - What did you know at this point? What were you, how did you feel about being in the Pacific?

Melvin Price (01:22:39) - Prior to that, I figured it was an excursion. You know, it would be more or less a piece of cake. But Kwajalein was steamy hot and smelly and everything and we did spend quite a bit of time there and I was thinking, what kind of cards am I being dealt? We still didn't know our final destination, but from Kwajalein later we went to Guam. And Guam, it was almost like Kwajalein. It was hot and sticky, had plenty of snakes, and tree frogs, huge frogs that were up in trees, something very unusual to me. Well, we only stayed there for a day or two, and then from then we went to Tinian. And that is where our final destination was.

Interviewer (01:23:52) - What was the name of your unit? Did your unit have a name? Did you have a name for your plane and your unit? Was there a specific name?

Melvin Price (01:24:03) - Well, we didn't really have a plane assigned to us. The way this was, planes were being lost over Japan big time. Not necessarily by any military action in Japan but malfunction of engines. But B-29s were being built in three different cities in the country. And every plane, every new plane would carry two new engines in the bomb bays, because engines were the main function of flying this long distance. We never had a plane assigned to us, because the hardened crews that they were flying these planes that did several missions to Japan, they would qualify for the new aircraft and then the aircraft that they were abandoning would be sent to somebody else. So, we would actually bounce around. All together I flew in three different planes, one was Nippon Nemesis and the other was Starduster and one of my favorites was Goin Jessie. Them three planes.

Interviewer (01:25:53) - So before we talk about your missions, can you tell me a little bit about what you did at, in Tinian when you weren't flying? What was life like there?

Melvin Price (01:26:08) - When we weren't flying, but we used to fly out. Well, actually, in between missions, we would still go airborne and cruise around the islands, and it was mostly to give bombardier training. In between Tinian, and Guam is an island called Rota, and we would head to Rota and our bombardier would drop one bomb. It was a live bomb, by the way, it was not a practice bomb. He would bomb a target on Rota just to sharpen his skills. And of course, I would have to report to the ground station our position all the time because we were a long distance from Japan and if they would pick up any of my transmissions it would be meaningless. And being out in the Pacific I realize that, in between Tinian and Japan, there's no friendly territory and there's, it's a lot of water. The Pacific Ocean is a pretty big stretch of water and what I would do was as much as possible, go swimming and Tinian itself is all coral, it's only about six inches of topsoil. And the natives did grow sugar cane there as well as Saipan growing sugar cane. That was the name, the main agricultural item. Well, Tinian doesn't really have any beaches, it's all coral cliffs. Some are not too high, and some are, well, I would say, about 150 feet. Well where we were stationed in our quarters, there was a little cove, and somebody had placed a long rope and anchored it, and the rope would go all the way down to the shoreline. Well, I really wanted to do that as much as possible. And prior to doing that, I would get on one side of the cliff and look over the side and kind of eyeball the shoreline. And then, what do I see on the shoreline? Sharks. So, I would grab chunks of coral and toss them out at the sharks and then they would take off and leave the area. So, then I would go to the rope, and slide right down and swim out. And we didn't have any bathing suits. We would swim in nude and swimming out in the coral and I would open my eyes in the salt water, which is a no, but I would do it, and there were loads of fish, I mean, brilliant ones, red ones and everything else, and I would spend quite a bit of time there. And as far as like the beach, it was nothing more than a place about maybe 20 feet long and it was all bits of dust from, from volcanic ash or whatever. And then to get back up again, have to go hand over hand over the cliff rail and at that time I was able to do it, but there is no way I could do that today.

Interviewer (01:30:32) - What was that?

Melvin Price (01:30:33) - And and also I, mean, if you don't mind, to continue to elaborate, Saipan was invaded first, and the flat area was completely controlled by our American forces and the remaining Japanese would go up in the mountains and our Marines felt that it was not worthwhile to try to get to them and they suffered unnecessary loss of life. So, it was still an active part. Well, several times what I would do is to hitch a ride and go to the airfield and go to the shoreline of Tinian, which is only about a mile away from Saipan and I would watch these Navy dive bombers come in and they would be bombing the mountain areas where the Japanese were holed up. And also, another occasion, when we weren't flying, if I was outside, I would hear a loud explosion and smoke. And at the flight line, it would be returning planes that crashed on the runway. And I would go out there and I do have pictures of this and it, the flames consumed everything almost in its entirety.

There are only little bits here and there. But as I look at it today we never did it actually, but in the rear compartment where the gunners are, they entered the plane through a small opening in the side that was the tail gunner, radar operator, and also the gunners and then in their front compartments the way we got into the plane was either through the bomb bay or else from the nose wheel, and we would kind of like scoot up, put our feet on the tires and get up into the plane. Well, if if we were to do an emergency landing, it never occurred to me at the time that the only way that we ever could have got out was to go through the tunnel to the rear of the plane. Upon making a landing, the plane always caught on fire, and consumed everything.

Interviewer (01:34:00) - Was that because of, an explosion inside the, the engine or—?

Melvin Price (01:34:07) - Well, it could be a combination of, not necessarily an engine, but a B-29 could fly and maintain altitude with two engines operating, both on one side. If you had to shut down two engines, you could maintain altitude for a short period of time, but slowly, it wasn't enough power to maintain. But as far as these planes crashing, it wasn't necessarily a loss of an engine, because we did many landings with shutting down an engine and operating with just three engines, but more than likely it was being hit in Japan either with flak or else fighter planes. Of course, hydraulics are a main part of operating everything and it could be that some of the hydraulics failed, and the plane wasn't able to brake or lower the landing gear.

Interviewer (01:35:26) - How important was that landing gear? Like, what, what was that landing gear? That was your wheels and everything.

Melvin Price (01:35:33) - Well, the landing gear was a very sophisticated landing gear. It was extremely hard to duplicate. It was made in Mariana, Georgia. And it was very well built. We never had a problem with the landing gear.

Interviewer (01:36:00) - That's great. I mean, I know we were right next to that plant where that landing gear was made.

Melvin Price (01:36:06) - You were!

Interviewer (01:36:06) - So it's good to hear. Kennesaw is right by Mariana.

Melvin Price (01:36:12) - I know I'm getting off the subject, but after the war ended, or it was even prior to the end of the war, the Russians were trying to duplicate a B-29, because they did get their hands on a few of them. They built about 2,000 and they were very faulty. And the main thing is that they couldn't build a landing gear. The Russians couldn't do it. Only the Georgians could do it. And they tried to buy them from this country, but our country wouldn't sell them.

Interviewer (01:37:00) - So, before we get into the missions you, you flew, I was just curious one more thing about life on base. What was the food like? And you know, how, what, what was it like to just live on base? What, what, what, what did you do and—?

Melvin Price (01:37:12) - Living quarters were probably as worst as you can get. We lived in a tent and we slept on cots, no mattress, no pillow, dirt floor. It was really tough to do. I mean, as far as a pillow goes, we had to roll up some clothing for a pillow and that's the way it was. And most of the time when I was there, I did spend it in there, but there were also a few **Quonset** huts. And some of the hardened crews were in the Quonset huts, and after living in the tent if there was an opening we were sent to the Quonset hut. And it was a tough feeling because why is the vacancy there? And of course, it's quite obvious that the vacancy is there because that crew did not make it. And as far as bathroom, there was a wooden building with screen walls, and there was a plank with holes, and that was the way our bathroom was.

Interviewer (01:39:13) - Did you ever get any fresh fruit or vegetables or fish, or was all your food from rations?

Melvin Price (01:39:19) - No. The food was terrible. The food was duplicated over and over again. And the main thing I liked was the homemade bread. We would get a lot of hash, everyday always hash. And the so-called butter was in large cans and it came from New Zealand and it was almost like grease. And the milk was all powdered milk. And potatoes were powdered potatoes. I'm a little bit surprised that, that we were fed so poorly. When I went into the service, I weighed 172 pounds and because of the type of food I was eating, I had lost 10 pounds. When I came back and I weighed 162 pounds.

Interviewer (01:40:39) - So tell me about the missions that your unit carried out? What, what were some memorable missions?

Melvin Price (01:40:45) - Well our bomb group was the the 20th Air Force and ninth bomb group, fifth squadron, and our particular plane designating the ninth bomb group, it had a Circle X on the tail. And other bomb groups had like an R or some other letter of some kind or other designations, but I personally feel that our bomb group was the most dominant one of them all. Because clippings in newsreels I see, it always seems to feature a B-29 with a circle X on the tail. The main functions of the 9th Bomb Group was, at the beginning of the war, to load the planes with percussion bombs, which meant that they would explode on a target in probably affecting two or three hundred feet to the side. But then, for some reason, they realized that Japan itself is constructed of paper and wood. So, because of that, they figured that they should switch to incendiary raids. And the way it was, there was a cluster of bombs, they weighed about thirty seven pounds, probably three, four dozen, and there was a tail fin on the edge, and also nine metal straps that held them at the cluster. And that a bombardier would drop them. The tail fin would point the bomb downward and then the tail fin would fall off and then the nine straps would explode. And once they exploded, well then the incendiary bombs would separate to the extent of about a half a mile to one side of the plane and half a mile to the other side of the plane. So, as far as the length of it goes, because they're being dropped simultaneously, and that is a cluster, it would cover about one mile. So, one B-29 would be able to set fires about one mile wide by over one mile long. And that alone, it would burn up all of the civilian homes. Okay, that was two of the objects that our group was assigned for. Another one of them was to a drop mines. Our group, I never went on a mine mission, but our group dropped mines into waters off the coast of

Japan, the sea of Japan, the Pacific side, and the mines totally encircled the island and Tokyo Bay, which was the main port in Japan. It was totally mined and ships could not enter the harbor. But the readings that I had done had said that the mines alone sunk more ships, than the entire Navy combined. That seems like a big statement to make. But one thing about Japan, they had absolutely no resources whatsoever. They didn't have rubber, iron, or coal, or coke, or petroleum. So everything had to be imported into Japan and that is why it was so important to more or less blockade the entire island. And of course, by doing this, even food that was imported to people were not enough so they were actually starving.

Interviewer (01:46:97) - Were these things you thought about at the time? Like, how did you think about, what did you think about dropping these firebombs, and did you think about the civilians?

Melvin Price (01:46:18) - I give a lot of credit to the people that were in this bomb group. They were no cowards, believe me. I mean, all of these guys, whether they were 19 or older. At the time, I thought, all that we were doing was, was just bombing industrial plants and stuff like this. And the thought, never entered my mind that some bombings were killing innocent civilians. And at the time none of us ever thought about that. It does seem to hurt once in a while, because everybody has a right to live. But it was a war, and it was run by people that loved war and they were trying to expand their empire. Getting back to Pearl Harbor, I can't really see why Japan was trying to attack a country which is so far superior to them in size and also industrial complexes.

Interviewer (01:47:57) - Yeah.

Melvin Price (01:47:58) -But Japan in the early years overran China, probably in the early thirties. And they also overran both Koreans and and they had no mercy whatsoever that they beheaded, they killed, they raped the woman and they were truthfully barbarians. And to an extent, we to a certain degree thought how brutal they were. They didn't seem to have any regard at all for human life. All they wanted was power and money more than anything else. And they, even after accumulating China and Korea, that they still weren't satisfied. Well, the other important item as far as B-29s was, after the war ended was to do P O W missions. P O W missions were to load the planes with medical supplies and food and seek out the prisoner of war camps. And our intelligence knew exactly where these camps were. And I did fly two of those missions.

Interviewer (01:49:39) - And what did you remember about those missions? What, what how did you, how did they work?

Melvin Price (01:49:51) - Well, I did mention, well our primary target was a POW camp outside of the Kobe Osaka area. And it was up to the navigator to get us there. Well, he missed it by about two hundred miles and we went south, but of course we were fully aware of how to get to the Kobe Osaka area and what we did was to go through the Inland Sea and then hit the area and we did make passes and and we could see these POWs in these enclosures. They were not in the yards, but they were waving to us through the windows. And we were flying at about 500 feet. And we would drop pallets of food supplies hoping that they would land in the compound area so the prisoners would get them. But, I doubt very much that if they landed where they were

supposed to, the Japanese who were starving would pass them on to the POWs. But, on this mission, the very last parachute was a medical supply parachute. It was blue in color and on the third or fourth pass across this area, the bombardier dropped the parachute, and it floated out to sea, and it was nowhere near the target area, and what I could see was Japanese fishing boats scooting over to retrieve this. One of our last drops with the food, the parachute came out, it would immediately deploy, and it had a wooden pallet. Well, what happened was that shroud line that held that the pallet did not disengage and what it was doing was slamming across the side of the plane and the parachute was fully open and it was extremely dangerous because there was no way that the plane could fly with all this drag. And our pilot said somebody has got to go into the bomb bay and cut the shroud line to get rid of this pallet that was banging the plane and to get rid of the pallet on the parachute. Well, who's going to volunteer? You're looking at him. What I did was put a parachute on and took my knife, and I've got the knife right here. And what I did was to walk across the catwalk and I'm looking down and we're only 500 feet and all I can see is ground. And civilians shaking their fists at us. And I was able to cut the shroud line. It was probably about this wide and about this thick [gestures with hand]. It was a real heavy cord. It took quite a bit of work to do it. And then, I was able to free it, and then come back in the plane. But it was a very dangerous thing to do. And who's going to volunteer?

Interviewer (01:54:23) - Well.

Melvin Price (01:52:24) - But, like I said, they were dedicated people.

Interviewer (01:54:33) - So tell me about your impressions of Iwo Jima and and what the Marines did there and why it was important to you?

Melvin Price (01:54:42) - Well, I do have deep feelings for the Marines. Our very first mission was the worst one. We were flying Nippon Nemesis, which was the first plane. After we completed our mission, our plane was badly damaged. There were 72 holes in the plane and the bomb bay doors would not close. And our pilots said that because of the drag with the bomb bay doors not being closed, it's gonna create a tremendous drag and burn a lot of fuel and we were never going to reach Tinian. And prior to that, we had a meeting one time saying that if for some reason we were on a raid and couldn't get back to base, what would we do? There were several options. One would be to land in Japan and be a POW and get beheaded, because that's what the Japanese were doing. Or else, to fly to Russia, which, at the northern tip of Japan was probably about 200 miles away. Well at the beginning of the war, I wasn't there then, but when the B-29s first started to do raids and ran across a circumstance like what I just described, they would go to Russia and those crews were actually captured. Approaching Russia, the Russians would send out fighters to escort the B-29, not knowing whether it was going to be a raid on their territory or not. But then, they would land. Like I previously mentioned, the Russians did build planes and they had the captured crews teach the Russians how to fly the plane. And there was only one incident where one crew was sent to Persia, which is Iran, and that crew was sent back to the States. But other than that, I don't really know how many were doing this thing, but that was really a no-no as far as going there. And then, the other option was to take your chances and try to make Iwo Jima. Well, prior to to this, Iwo Jima was controlled by the Japanese. And the flights going to Japan

would be attacked by fighters that were based in Iwo Jima and then after planes returning from the target area, they would be hit again with fighters from Iwo Jima. So, it was very important to capture Iwo Jima, being held by the Japanese to eliminate this obstacle. Because Iwo Jima is directly on the flight path to Japan and there was no way to avoid it, flights would not fly over, they would probably fly about 50 miles either west of the island. But still it was not sufficient. One thing, the very first base for B-29s was on Saipan. Tinian was not occupied then or invaded and the very first B-29s that did fly mediocre raids on Japan at high altitudes, when the planes had left Iwo Jima they were fully aware that there were no planes left there, so what do they do? They also had some small bombers on Iwo Jima. And when the B-29s would leave for Japan, these planes would fly at a very low altitude, undetected by radar. And what they would do is to bomb the areas in Saipan. But that came to a close. But getting back to my feelings about Iwo Jima, well Iwo Jima was only secured, about an hour, I mean about a month, before I started my flights. And of the Marines, 7,000 were killed and just about 20,000 were injured. And it was one of the bloodiest conflicts that the Marines ever had. And I have since met many of them. But, once the Japanese were thoroughly eliminated, on the way back, our pilot did say that we're going to land on Iwo Jima. Well, Iwo Jima is nothing more than coral sand. No trees of any kind and it's only got a small fighter strip. And any B-29 trying to land, the tower would wave them off because they didn't want you to come there. But anyway, B-29's did land and we were able to land and able to get some added fuel and close our bomb bay doors and then continue on and then land in Iwo Jima, I mean in Tinian and Iwo Jima labeled us as, their being hospitality for us. But just because of that there was no way that I would be here talking to you today. Because to land at sea, that there was in most cases no rescue available. But I don't know if it's part of your questions or not, but, towards the end of the war there was from Iwo Jima to Japan, what is called a lifeline. There would be an aircraft carrier and then cruisers and destroyers, and the closest to Japan would be submarines. And the people at Iwo Jima and also the Navy, knew in advance that, that there were B-29's flying in this area and the submarines, some of them were within 25 miles of the coast of Japan. And they were spaced possibly about 50 miles apart and I give these submarines a lot of credit, but because they could have been hit real easy. But we never had to use them, but the procedure was that if you were hit bad enough or else had some malfunction with your aircraft, you couldn't make it back to base and you had to land at sea, which is called ditching. The radio operator would press down on his key and send a solid signal. No dots and dashes, a solid signal. And the submarine would hone in on the signal and knew the distance and also how far away they were from the flight path, and they would correct themselves and then the submarine would surface, when they thought the time it was right and didn't rescue the crew if they were able to get out. But many times, the crews were not able to get out. But there were many that were saved. And many times, when you would ditch at sea, the plane would catch fire and part of our training also was, if you're able to get out of the plane, how are you going to surround the fire! So, we did extensive practicing in Pyote, Texas in a swimming pool. You would swim underwater, and when it's time to get a breath, you would flutter up near the surface and form a little pocket of air and then take a gasp, and then swim down again, and then swim away. But I don't know how effective that would be. But because the plane would expel life rafts, and I don't know if they would be farther away from the fire or not. Of course, if they were in the fire, well, then they would be consumed. But, what I'm telling you I don't know if it would work or not, but anyway, I was well

prepared for this. That's why I was doing all the extra swimming, feeling that if the occasion ever arose, I would be able to do it.

Interviewer (02:06:54) - So what's your greatest memory while flying in the Pacific?

Melvin Price (02:06:59) - I've got a few that kind of stick with me and seeing people die in flames, really hits me. When there's actually nothing you can do. I've seen many and on one of our missions we had to go to Okinawa. But because we couldn't reach Japan or any other destination and we, we landed at Iwo Jima, at Okinawa. I, I know I'm stumbling a little bit, but, but I'm trying to get it straight. We landed at Oak Okinawa and we had our plane next to a fighter strip, and we actually landed on this fighter strip and we were able to do it because of our good hydraulics and I am in, up front of the plane and that what I'm seeing is a long light, long line of fighter planes, coming back from a mission and these planes are coming in, flying at a real low altitude, at the runway and when they came to the tower, they would shoot straight up in the air. And they would flip their landing gear out and make a wide circle. And there must have been probably about 30 of these. And they're all doing this. It was really a great air show to see all of this. And one of these that's coming down, he's not doing this. He's going and going and this is right in front of me, a couple hundred feet away. And the plane hits a bank, and then starts on fire. And I go over there, and I see this pilot in the cockpit being burned alive, I don't know if he got killed with the crash or else with the fire. But one thing that's strange is that outside of the plane was a women's shoe. And apparently, he had a wife or a sweetheart back in the States and he just wanted to keep that with him. But after seeing this and there's absolutely nothing I could do, I just walked away. Um, I couldn't look at it anymore. And then on one of our POW missions, our military was also in Shanghai and there was a POW camp in Shanghai, and our mission was to go to that Shanghai POW camp and do the same thing and drop the food and medical supplies just before coming to Okinawa, which was on, on the flight route, we blew an engine. And then usually as you're flying, if you have any type of malfunction what you need to do is to make a landing as soon as possible. Well, we did make a landing on this fighter strip and we parked our plane, and and what we needed to do do was to get an engine from Tinian, which meant that we spent about two weeks on Okinawa. And, and, and during that time, uh, we were the, the only B- 29 there. And and what they were doing, they were bringing in POWs from Japan and it was only a matter of a few feet away, and this plane comes in and I'm looking at these POWs coming out of the plane, and they're looking at the tail of my plane, you know, the Circle X. And apparently, they had recognized that from some of the bombing missions from our bomb group. Well, I went over there to talk to them and believe me, they were tortured and brutalized, and they were skin and bone and their clothing was all tattered and they were hugging me and talking to me. And that really hits me as to one of the things that people that have gone through the war and then shown gratitude to another person and because of this life saving occupation of Iwo Jima, I have met several Marines. Any Marine function, I always attend. I've met—one time, I was in Lowe's doing something and here's a guy coming towards me and he's wearing a hat, Iwo Jima. And I said, hi and I walked a few steps and turned around and so did he. And we turned around and I said to him, were you on Iwo Jima? And he said, yes. And I said, were you in the battle? He said, yes. And we talked about a few things. And also I have grandchildren that are highly interested in the military, and we visit Parris Island, which is a Marine base. And we go through all of the artifacts

and also the history of the Marines. And at one time when I was there, well, when you first get in, they ask you, I mean, enter the museum. Well, I know the base first, you have to show your ID because it's heavily guarded, and I would show them my South Carolina driver's license and they would tell me to pull over to the side. And then a marine would come and and quiz me about different things, wanting to know why I'm in here, and we're here for the museum, which is open to the public. Of course, they do screen pretty closely what to do and and when you, I enter the museum that they, that they quiz me, and and I told 'em that I was a B-29er and I'm familiar with, with Iwo Jima and we walked around and this this guy he went upstairs to talk to the manager of the museum, probably a curator. I don't know. More than likely, yes. And then he comes down and he says, look, I want you to come upstairs here. And there was a marine there that was on Iwo Jima. And he was in a wheelchair and his son was there with him, and and they did make frequent visits to the museum. And we discussed the Marines then as to what they did. And one of the most important things to as far as Marines go to me is, I did tell you that I do attend all of these functions, symposiums with Marines. Well, the Yorktown in Mount Pleasant is strictly Navy. Of course, Marines are part of the Navy. And they were celebrating the 75th anniversary of Iwo Jima. And what he invited was, a gentleman that was awarded the Medal of Honor, Woody Williams, he was there also. And it was a great function. I went with one of my neighbors, and we were sitting in the background. And the Marines, were doing their celebrating and Woody Williams was sitting by himself in the first row. I said to my neighbor, you know, I'm going to go over and talk to this guy, so, I went over to him, and I introduced myself. You know, I'm a B 29er I asked him, have you been awarded the Medal of Honor. And how did you get it? Well, he was a flamethrower, and he had the gun, and behind him were two other Marines that were carrying the fuel tanks. So, so he went from hole to hole and he would shoot the flame into these holes. And never got wounded, but he was a prime target, because the Japanese were all in dugouts, and as the Marines came ashore, they were prime targets, and they were mowed down big time. But he was brave enough to stand an attack and do this thing. And I told him, I said, you know, I really need to thank you for what you did. And he said, you know, you're the first one that ever told me this. And I said, well, I think it's kind of hard for me to believe. And I said, you know, I was only 19 when I was flying. And he said, we all were. And he said, "I need to thank you. He said it to me for flying B-29s and because after his invasion of Iwo Jima, they would have to go to another Japanese held island. And that kind of put the end to him. But there were 14 Marines that were awarded Medals of Honors and all 13 of them have died. He was the only one, he just recently died and he was highly recognized. In fact, when he died, he was only a matter of maybe six months ago when he died. And it was kind of sad for me because I have talked to him several times and he was actually brought to the Capitol, and he laid in state there. And I think that was really something great, to acknowledge a man like him.

Interviewer (02:20:50) - That's wonderful. So, what made you want to take photographs when you were overseas? And what kind of a camera did you use? Can you tell me about that?

Melvin Price (02:21:00) - Photography was my hobby. And I had a simple box camera and the film had a paper backing on it, and I had a couple of rolls of film and as I took pictures overseas, I ran out of film. So how do you, how do you get to the film? I got to be friendly with the fire chief, there was a fire station then near our, our bomb group and I got to know him quite well. Well, his

hobby was also photography and he had a dark room with all the equipment for developing and printing and also enlarging. So, talking to him, he told me to go over to the reconnaissance division at the airfield and to try to get a roll of film. Well the film that they had, I was using was not a high grade film, but the reconnaissance division uses this film for flying over Japan and photographing the different areas so they could determine where the next bomb raid would be. Usually, if a single plane flew over Japan, there was no ground reaction, they were untouched. Well, the film that I got from them was a high density film and it was in a vacuum can, and it was about six inches wide. So, there's no way it's going to fit in my camera. So, what I would do was to practice cutting the same size film that my camera took. And of course I had to do it in total darkness. Once I was able to do this, I would put the paper backing on it and then load my camera and I'm good to go.

Interviewer (02:23:35) - And do you remember the make of your camera? What type of camera it was?

Melvin Price (02:23:40) - Yes, it was a Kodak, I believe it was a model 620. It was a cheap type of box camera. You could pull it apart and it would be very easy to load it.

Interviewer (02:23:56) - Did you have to hide your photos from sensors or anything like that?

Melvin Price (02:24:03) – Now we could do just about anything as far as jurisdiction goes, and following the rules while being overseas, we were untouched. We could dress the way we wanted to dress and it's, it is not like the way it would be say in the states. In other words, we had great freedom.

Interviewer (02:24:38) - More freedom when you were overseas than you did when you were in training?

Interviewer (02:24:41) - Oh, no question about it.

Interviewer (02:24:45) - Were there some memorable pictures that you took? You remember taking?

Melvin Price (02:24:54) - I think probably all of them are [laughs]. I really can't, well there's one that I really like. It's a picture of me, the way I live, I lived, uh, or dressed, when I'm being overseas. There was no dress code. You could wear whatever you please.

Interviewer (02:25:19) - So when you were serving, whether it was in the States or overseas, do you remember interacting with, um, women, auxiliary units, or women who were in the military at all?

Melvin Price (02:25:33) - With other servicemen, you mean?

Interviewer (02:25:35) - With women. Women who were in service.

Melvin Price (02:25:36) - Oh no. Personally I never had any interaction with any women. I know that there were women that that did great work in the war, especially the woman, it's called Wafs. The most important thing that they did was to transport fighter planes from the States to Russia, the fighter planes that the Russians loved. And our pilots didn't like it one bit because we had fighter planes far superior. It was a P-39 and it was made by Curtis Wright in Buffalo, New York. And these women would pick up the plane, fly to Alaska. And either they fly to Russia or Russia would come and pick up the planes.

Interviewer (02:26:46) - You mentioned the parachute packers too, so you knew that there were, there were women who worked packing the parachutes.

Melvin Price (02:26:53) - Yes.

Interviewer (02:26:54) - Did, did you ever, did you ever talk to them?

Melvin Price (02:26:56) - No, no, that was only in Pyote Texas. As far as overseas goes, there were no women at all over there. Well, there were some nurses. But other than that, it was strictly all males.

Interviewer (02:27:17) - Did you ever have to go to the infirmary? Did you ever interact with the medical staff at your base?

Melvin Price (02:27:26) - No. No. But as far as any type of thing, what was very common was diarrhea, from food that was too old or not the proper mix, but, but I avoided all that stuff. And mostly it was chocolate, chocolate milk.

Interviewer (02:27:53) - The chocolate milk was bad or the chocolate milk was something you—
?

Melvin Price (02:27:57) - Contaminated, possibly.

Interviewer (02:28:01) - What about army chaplains? I was curious about this because you mentioned your Catholic faith. Was there, was there a chaplain or someone else assigned to your unit?

Melvin Price (02:28:10) - Well, yes. The chaplain was a priest and overseas, there was a chapel for services. It was shared by both Protestant and other religions of any kind. But I do recall that well, I always went to church every Sunday. And what church was like they would park a truck out in the field and drop the tailgate and spread a cloth across the tailgate and serve mass off of that and we would sit on the ground. But also, as far as our crew goes, I believe, even to this day, that I was the only Christian. In preparation for a mission 10:30 in the evening, evening, well I specify evening because we're talking about daylight missions to Japan. At 10:30 I would attend and uh, attend mass and receive Holy Communion, and then at the very end, the priest or chaplain, whatever you want to call him he would say, drop to your knees and thank the good

Lord that you are still here and that you will return. And at takeoff time, there was also a chaplain alongside the runway, that would bless each plane as we were taking off. So truthfully, religion overseas was a big part of me.

Interviewer (02:30:32) - You mentioned you were the only Christian; how did you know, did you talk to the other members of your crew about religion?

Melvin Price (02:30:38) - We did have discussions and our bombardier was an atheist and he was so proud, he used to brag about being an atheist. And as far as the rest goes I don't really know too much about them, but I know that they've attended any religious, services at all, but being strong in religion, I know our CFC, our Central Fire Control, the gunner, he was possibly about, maybe in his late twenties, and he was married with two children and he would always go to town and seek out companions, and I feel that if he had any religion, he certainly wouldn't do this. If he had commitments back home. But I never got into stuff like that, though.

Interviewer (02:31:51) - Did you have any interactions with Native people that lived in the islands where you were serving?

Melvin Price (02:32:03) - Not really a whole lot. I did try to take photographs. Well, the Natives were dark in color. And it seems as though every day they would be whiter and whiter to us, but, but they were gathered together into a compound and it was heavily guarded and I did attempt to take pictures of them and I failed a few times, but I was able to get a few pictures and then I recall one time when I was walking down the street, there were some native women with a military, and I took a picture of them, and they did say, don't show Japanese soldiers. Apparently, the Japanese were really exploiting the women.

Interviewer (02:33:11) - So they were gathered in a compound, was that because the military had taken over all the other buildings that were there?

Melvin Price (02:33:21) - Just about as far as buildings go, I don't believe I've ever seen a structure where a family lived. Any building that was there was actually done by the military. And I know that in the compound, that they really weren't treated that well. They would just gather together and as far as the bathroom goes, uh, and I've seen it, they would scoop out a hole in the ground and then do whatever they had to do and then recover it.

Interviewer (02:34:14) - And yeah and I, you didn't speak with them, so you don't know if they spoke English or if they had their—

Melvin Price (02:34:21) - Well, it was more or less broken English.

Interviewer (02:34:24) - Okay.

Melvin Price (02:34:26) - I don't know if they had a, a native language or not.

Interviewer (02:34:23) - Now you mentioned that you were already engaged to marry Marie, your future wife. You, you had gotten engaged when you went home before you were shipped overseas. Can you tell me about meeting her, and then also about how you kept in touch, how you sent letters maybe during the war?

Melvin (02:34:57) - Okay, well, how I met Marie, well, across the street from me was a woman the same age, Mildred Hules was her name, and she was always more or less trying to pursue me, but I didn't have the least bit of interest in her. A friend of mine and I were walking in the evening one time down the street and Millie Hules and also Marie were walking together, and we met and we introduced ourselves and then we decided that we would walk Marie home. Well then, we did. We talked a little bit and said, how about double dating next Sunday and we'll go and see a movie. And they agreed to it. And we will meet at Marie's house. So, my buddy came over to get me and we both walked over to Marie's house. And we met and, who's going to go with who? I mean, Millie Hules thought that I was going to pick her, but I didn't. So I took Marie. And then we went out, and then after the movie we stopped and had a sundae and then we walked Marie back home. And I asked her if she would want to go out again next week and do the same thing. And she said yes. So, from then on we kept dating and dating. Well once I left for the service, she was still available. So, my friend that was with me when we were double dating, he used to go to her house and try to date her. And of course she turned it down. And my brother, he used to go from woman to woman. You know, that was one of his things. And when he was discharged and I was gone, he went to see Marie and asked if she would go out with him. And he said that I did not have much experience dating women. And he would like to go with her, and she wouldn't go. And I know that she did turn down several men. But she did write to me a lot. And whenever I had a chance, I would phone her, and we would talk and I always communicated with her, and never with my mother and father, because she actually turned out to be number one. And the same thing, when I got back from Tinian to Oakland, California, the first thing I did was to send her a telegram, to her.

Interviewer (02:38:46) - Did you save any of the letters she wrote to you?

Melvin Price (02:38:53) - She did save some. And in fact, I didn't notice, but they were loving letters, and the wording came from my heart, and I never knew she had these. And after she passed away, I started to go through, well, she kept a journal and I happened to run across one paper where I had written to her with strong terms of love. And when she died, I was the last person to say goodbye to her at the coffin, and what I did was take this paper and I put it with her. And what that amounted to was, may God keep you safe for me. And here I'm in the war zone and I'm thinking more of her than of myself. But that is with her right now.

Interviewer (02:40:10) - Did she tell you while you were serving overseas what her experience was like at home? What was she, what was it like on the home front?

Melvin Price (02:40:20) - She never said really too much. With the exception of of being pursued by suitors more than anything else. But she was preparing to get married without a doubt.

Interviewer (02:40:39) - So, tell me about your experience of the end of the war? How did you find out about the bombings of Pearl Harbor, excuse me, not Pearl Harbor, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and what was that like?

Melvin Price (02:40:56) - Yeah, well on the way to the flight line, well, we always went by truck. And usually, the gunners would go first to check the amount of ammunition and then I would leave about an hour and a half later with the officers. And on the way to the fight line was a compound heavily guarded. It was the 509-bomb group. And it seemed kind of strange, it was up on the side of a hill and we never saw any of them fly. They didn't have any plane designated to our knowledge, and it did bother us quite a bit that they were there. And of course that was the group that did the nuclear bombing. And what was the other part of the question?

Interviewer (02:42:02) - What do you remember about your experience?

Melvin Price (02:42:04) - Oh, okay. Alright, yeah. Well once the bombs were dropped, we didn't know anything probably the people in the states were the first ones to know about this. And people asked me how did I feel? Well, there was no great celebration at all with any of us. I don't know, but apparently, we were pretty well hardcore or something from what we'd been going through for a whole year. But we were just glad that that the war ended, and it was time to go home. Well, our crew was broken up. And I was friendly with other crew members also. It wasn't just our own crew. And I figured it was time for me to go home. And I wasn't going home. And I believe the gunners that had less service than me probably went home before me. Well, I soon found out why. I was called into an office and an officer talked to me and said, we need radio operators real bad. Like I told you before, the training was the longest of my crew member. And that they needed radio operators to start a, a new bomb group in Guam. And if I would agree to sign up for three more years, they would upgrade me to, to the top, master sergeant. And I refused because I, I had enough. I wanted to go home. But they still held me back, thinking possibly I would change my mind. But I didn't and finally, well getting back to this new bomb group in Guam, there were some volunteers, but I believe that the crew more or less came from the states, but because I doubt very much that, that anybody that went through one year of war was ready to resume another operation. But this was in 1946 and I was told that once the bomb group was formed that they would go to the Philippines. Well, the way I look at it today, the Korean War was 1950. They were preparing in 1946 for the Korean War and B-29s would be based in the Philippines. And the Philippines were easy access to Japan and also Korea. But finally, it was time for me to go home. And I got a notification, and I was told to take everything with me, except a 45 caliber pistol. I had to surrender that. And as far as all the other equipment, I was told to take it with me. Well, well Tinian has a small harbor and a group of us went to the harbor. What we had to do was go to Saipan to pick up a ship that will take us to the States. The harbor at Tinian could not accommodate any large ship of any kind. So we boarded this LCI, which is a landing craft infantry. It's a type of invasion vessel where infantry would stand and then once it reached the shoreline, the front would drop down like a ramp and then, but, but anyway, it was about maybe a 20 mile ride in, in that LCI to Saipan and it took probably about a half hour or so. Some of them got seasick in that short ride. But we stayed in Saipan for a few days and then, the ship that we were going to take away what they call a victory ship. It had a sharp nose, it wasn't one of these freighters

with a blunt nose, it was a fast vessel and it was called the Marine Dragon. So we took the LCI again to the ship and boarded the ship and it was actually made into a troop carrier. And there were bunks about three high and the ship left Saipan headed for the states and it was not just, uh, a boat ride, we were told that everybody had to do some sort of work on the ship. Well after a day or two, there was a roster came out, and my name was on there, where I needed to report the following day for kitchen duty, and report to the mess sergeant. So, I, with a bunch of others, went there, and reported to the mess sergeant, and he looked at me, and he said, you were a B 29er? And I said, yes. And he said, You're not going to do any work on this ship, and he said, I want you to go back to your bunk and he gave me whole cans of food. Food that we never ate for a whole year you know, a lot of good stuff, chili and vegetables and everything, fruits. Well, when I got back and then all the others came back for the day, I shared all of this with everybody. Because everybody was starving for food. And that's the way it was. It took 14 days from Saipan to Oakland. And I I I remember distinctly that when we passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, everybody yelled and screamed like crazy. And when we approached Oakland, there was a band playing **music** and we were given physicals, and uniforms, and also a designation as to where our separation would be. And that's the time when I sent a telegram to Marie. And they're giving us these physicals, and they're drawing my blood, and my blood is a real dark red, and and I'm looking at them alongside of other blood samples, and they're actually blood color. And I'm thinking, what in the world is this? Of course, it didn't mean anything. So from Oakland, I took a train to Atterbury, Illinois, and that's when I got my separation. And I was still allowed to keep everything that I had. And I took it all home.

Interviewer (02:51:06) - So what was your final rank? You know, and all told, how long have you served overseas?

Melvin Price (02:51:12) - Well, I was a staff sergeant, that's a pretty high grade and in fact, there were two staff sergeants, and the gunners were a, a, a lower rank.

Interviewer (02:51:29) - Had you started as a staff sergeant too, or did you become a staff sergeant, or you promoted while you were over overseas?

Melvin Price (02:51:36) - Well I left the states as a regular sergeant and overseas I got promoted because of my position. The biggest positions for enlisted men were radio operator and also the central fire control.

Interviewer (02:52:00) - And all told, how long have you been away from home? Did you go home at all between the trip, when you, between Texas and, and coming back?

Melvin Price (02:52:12)- Well, it was just the one time when we, when we finished our training as a radio operator in that DeLeon route to Texas. And after that, there was no term or anything.

Interviewer (02:52:30) - And that had been what 1944? And now it was 1946?

Melvin Price (02:52:35) - Yeah, yeah, in that neighborhood.

Interviewer (02:52:36) - Okay. So what was it like for you to come home and restart your life as a civilian?

Melvin Price (02:52:48) - It didn't seem like too much of a transition. Of course, you had to get all new clothing and everything and thankfully, I was able to get four years of college, under the GI Bill of Rights. And possibly that is what I was really aiming for. But at an early age, I thought I wanted to be a surgeon. And love conquers all. For, for, for me to go away for four, seven years and not get married or, or else there would be no way to possibly do marriage in college at the same time, at that time. So thankfully, I got four years of engineering and I feel that it was a big help to me. I love to study. I do this every day.

Interviewer (02:54:04) - Where did you, where did you go to school?

Melvin Price (02:54:08) - It was a correspondence school and it was very difficult, by the way. I had to study a course. We did get a lot of guidance, and as far as paperwork goes, I would write it out and then my wife Marie, she would type it out and then I would mail it. But it was well recognized, and it was great. I learned a lot from it.

Interviewer (02:54:43) - And were you working at the same time you were doing this correspondence?

Melvin Price (02:54:48) - Well, I did have a job at the same place where my father worked. But I wasn't really so happy with it. I did hear about Bethlehem Steel, which is outside of Buffalo. It's about 45 miles away. And I felt that, with my education and smarts that, I could do well over there. So, I, I did write a letter to the employment office, listing some of my qualifications and I got a response that, that, that they forwarded this to a, department head and he was very interested in talking to me. So, so what I did, I went there, and I was immediately hired. I served as a planning engineer. I did have an immense background in mechanics. And before long I was rapidly promoted supervising groups of hourly workers. And I worked for 30 years and I was age 55 then, and at the time, they were offering lump sum pensions or else continued to work and it was going to be a one time offer. And you could work on until you wanted to retire and be on a monthly pension. Well, Marie told me, retire. Well I made good money at Bethlehem Steel. She didn't have to work. That there was absolutely no sense at all in her finding a job, even though she had worked before, after leaving high school. And her job was to raise the three kids and provide good, sound meals, and do whatever it had to do. And it worked out really well. I am so glad that she didn't have to work. But she did have a lot of friends. And they used to go out for lunch and do all sorts of things, which I was very pleased with.

Interviewer (02:57:42) - What kind of work did she do between high school and getting married?

Melvin Price (02:57:46) - She was working in a department store.

Interviewer (02:57:50) - And you, did you get married right away in 1946?

Melvin Price (02:57:55) - Well, I was discharged in in, in April and we got married, August 10th. Well, my brother, he was going and dating a girl and they never talked about marriage. Well, as soon as he found out that Marie and I were going to get married, his girlfriend said that he's not going to get married before you. So they did push it to the limit and they got married before us.

Interviewer (02:58:40) - And when was your first child born?

Melvin Price (02:58:44) - It didn't take long. It took about nine months. That's what it was.

Interviewer (02:58:49) - And, and what were your children's names?

Melvin Price (02:58:52) - What was what?

Interviewer (02:58:53) - Your children, what were their names?

Melvin Price (02:58:55) - My oldest daughter was Margaret. And she passed away. And then there was Judy. She lives in Pinehurst, North Carolina. And then my son Jim, who you already met. And Jim is my lifeblood. He does everything for me. He forbids me to step one foot on a ladder or change a light bulb or anything.

Interviewer (02:59:35) - So thinking about how the world changed, you know, after World War II, there were some major things that happened in the United States, including a civil rights movement. Were you aware of kind of what was going on? I know you know, you grew up in New York and then eventually you came and moved to the South.

Melvin Price (02:59:59) – Well, being in the service, I really didn't follow it too close, but there was one event which really hurts me. I was at a Christmas party, I do get a lot of invites from my neighbors because my neighbors are beautiful people and they more or less looked after me. But anyway, at this Christmas party, it was more or less a family affair and there was a woman there that she was aware of me because of my neighbor possibly telling her who I was. Well, she was an activist and the thing she said to me, how I was involved in the air offensive against Japan with the innocent people and everything else and she never showed any concern whatsoever about the loss of life of troops or the sacrifices of this. And I didn't give her the satisfaction to give her any kind of an answer. And all I said was, look, you have your opinions and I've got mine. But years later, she was at a party again, probably four years later, and she came to me, and she had a whole different tone. Apparently, she gathered all of her negative thoughts together, and realized, hey, wait a minute, you know, there's people that made big sacrifices.

Interviewer (03:02:00) - And we, we talked a little bit about, you know, religion, you know, during the war and the role it played for you. I realized I hadn't asked; did you know any Jewish soldiers? Or any, any Jewish people?

Melvin Price (03:02:14) - I had loads of Jewish friends and, I mean, real, real good friends. When I lived in Dunes West Dr Solomon, who is one of the best eye surgeons in the country, and his wife was an attorney, and they had two boys, and they were the finest people you would want to know. And they were always visiting me, and I would visit them, and then, I did have other friends. As far as a Jewish person goes, it's just like me or just like you. I really can't see a difference in it has always bothered me from my early ages as to why people are against Jewish people or even against their country and their values. I've never been anywhere close to that.

Interviewer (03:03:34) - Were you aware of, did, did you know about what was going on in Europe with the Holocaust? Did that come, did you learn about that later? Or I'm curious.

Melvin Price (03:03:26) - No, I followed that very closely. Yes, in fact I took it, DVDs from the library and if I run across a German one, which possibly has a little bit of background for the Holocaust, I will pick it up, because I just loved to read all of that stuff, but I was fully aware of the Holocaust in my early years, and I find it so hard as to why one individual, Adolf Hitler, they were working his subordinates over to establish this genocide. And particularly, well, of course, if they were after Catholics, and also African Americans too. But their focus was on Jewish. That they would break up families, that they would take over their assets, their buildings, businesses, and whatever. But as far as the internment camps go, I find it so hard that a common soldier being brainwashed by his superiors to strip people naked, put them in showers, and then put them into a chamber under false pretenses and who's going to turn the valve? Or who's going to drop the pill? And also who's going to dig this big trench? And, who's going to run the bulldozer? I've always thought, how can anybody do this? I did follow the Nuremberg trials very closely. And I did have a real good DVD about Eichmann, as to how he started and when he moved to South America. I'm reading up on all this stuff here.

Interviewer (03:06:22)- So, excuse me, looking back at your, your life and at, at the war and its impact, why do you think it's important for students now to learn about World War II?

Melvin Price (03:06:43) - It, it's possible that, that those that did something of value don't speak up. Well, I as one for years and years never talked at all about anything. And I did mention that I did have all this equipment. Well after about ten years of marriage, my wife said you know we need to destroy all this stuff. Because it's bringing back too many memories. So, what I did was dig a hole. You know, I actually brought back a 50-caliber machine gun bullet. And I put that in there and also the medical kit with the morphine and some of the other stuff, well my son Jim, he used to play around with some of the stuff like the oxygen mask and stuff and, and my helmet and as far as communicating in a plane, when we had a throat mic, there were two discs that would go around your tonsils, and they'd wrap around, and then you would plug it in, and that way you could talk to everybody in the plane. And we discarded all of that stuff. But a few years back my grandson talked to me and said you know there's a guy in North Carolina that's got a helmet, Mel Price and he wanted to know if that was the one that's living in Mount Pleasant. And I really haven't got any idea because I thought that we destroyed all of this stuff.

Interviewer (03:08:57) - So Melvin Price (03:08:59) - Did I answer the question?

Interviewer (03:09:00) - So your wife kind of felt it was time to say goodbye to those memories, but at the same time, I know you, you told me that you talked to students, you know, at, at your high school.

Melvin Price (03:09:09) - Oh, yes.

Interviewer (03:09:10) - Eventually you decided to talk about—.

Melvin Price (03:09:11) - Well I never did speak to anybody. I did attend military functions and for some reason people would, would seek me out. And then of course, after them telling me what the purpose was, well, then I agreed to it and they were interviews and also phone conversations, but in Wanda High School, which got 4,000 students, they have an ROTC class, and it is big, and it's geared towards the Air Force. Well, the people that run it are two female military personnel, and also a couple retired officers. And I got a phone call and they asked me if I would come and, and speak to, to the ROTC class. And then I wasn't really too sure about that. But, but anyway they asked me to come over so we could talk a little bit more. So, I did. And then I thought it was a great thing because these students were interested in military and the proper source was lacking to tell. So we set up a time here and they told me where to park, and a student escorted me to the office. We talked a while, and then I went at the head of the class, and there were well over a hundred students. And I did ask them, well what should I talk about and what I shouldn't talk about. And they said, just talk. Well, the whole staff and some of the teachers stood in the background. And I spent a whole hour talking to them. And then there was a question-and-answer period. And then finally the bell rang. And it was time for them to go to another class. So I go back to the office, and I said, well, I hope I did well, and I'll be leaving. And they said, wait a minute, you aren't ready to go, because there's three more classes to go. And I did a second one, and then it was lunchtime. I just drank water, and then I did the third one, and then the fourth one was the last one. And all together there was possibly 500 students in there and I was told that, what I was telling the students was stuff that they had never ever heard of before. And as I'm speaking, I'm looking at these kids, you know, they're high school kids, probably 16, 17 years old, seniors, freshmen, and their eyes are glued to me, really, that they're not talking with their neighbor or anything else. And after I got, in fact, I'm looking down in the first row, is this one, girl. She's looking at me and she's looking and looking. Her eyes, she wouldn't take her eyes off of me. And after I got through, she walked over to me and she handed me a crumpled dollar bill. And she said, Mr. Price, can I buy you a bottle of water? Oh my God.

Interviewer (03:13:47) - So what, what do you hope students will learn from your experiences?

Melvin Price (03:13:55) - Well, as far as what was done to establish our freedom, I talk to people in their 30s and 40s, and I will throw a few things at them, and they don't know where Tinian is, they never heard of the Marianas, they never heard of a B 29. In fact, I was asked one time, what sort of passenger plane is that? So there's totally a lack of knowledge. I don't know if there's a big

gap or not, I don't believe even today that they're really coming out and promoting strongly any of these things. But people that have gone through this, and meeting people at the same level as what I've gone through, really makes my day.

Interviewer (02:15:12) - Yeah. And why do you think, why do you think it's important that we remember?

Melvin Price (03:15:19) - Well our country has the greatest freedom of any country in the world. You can do almost anything or say anything and get away with it. Especially the freedom of speech. And people can demonstrate, regardless of what the purpose is, and they aren't bothered. And there are many times that I feel that, in in these times. As of today, as of today, we're lacking a lot on leadership. I believe that there are a lot of brilliant people out there that could do a much better job as to what is being done today, especially in the military. I'm orientated towards the military, so military means a lot to me. And a previous question you asked me before was, about, aviators. Well, you never asked me about leadership of the military. Well, I have the highest respect for General Patton. He's, my idol. If you've ever seen the movie, he starts off addressing the troops, never let this S. O. B. die for his country. No, I'm not saying this right. Never die for your country, let that S. O. B. die for his country. That's when General Patton said it. And then I feel that he was one of the greatest ones. But, of course, there was Eisenhower, Bradley, and, of course, in the Navy, there was Nimitz, Bull Halsey. They were great. And, uh, uh, B-29's when they first started, they started in India. And, and they were flying the hump and establishing a base in China. Well, that was not going to work. General MacArthur, who was the Supreme Commander, he had jurisdiction over everybody, the Navy and Army and Marines. And but by establishing this base in China, Japanese would have access to it, and it wouldn't work. And General MacArthur, who was, uh, I'm going to say, kicked out of Bataan, he said, I shall return. That's his slogan. Well for political reasons, I believe he wanted to build B 29 bases in the Philippines. And everybody else, especially the Navy, The Nimitz and Bull Halsey, said that we've got to go to the Marianna's and how are you going to, you're gonna get there 1500 miles away and they said that's the way we're building a new plane that's capable of doing it. And that they would be the one. The original commander of the B 29 was general Hansel and he would start in general for the first B 29 that flew of out Japan. And he, he was very conservative. He wanted a plane to fly at 30,000 feet in the do to bombing, then. Well, at that high altitude the flak guns could not reach that altitude in planes that Japan had, could not reach an altitude. But at that high altitude only about 5 percent of the targets were ever hit. And everything else was just wasted. And at the time, they were fighting the Gulf Stream. That is when the Gulf Stream was first discovered. Up until then nobody knew about the Gulf Stream. And what it meant was that it was directly over Japan and the planes would be flying against the Gulf Stream which was over 200 miles per hour and the planes would be only cruising at a very slow rate. And of course the ordinance that was dropped would be swept away also. Well, he insisted upon 30,000 feet and then the Supreme Commander, General Arnold, that was based in Washington he said, we are not going to win the war this way. So, they replaced him on Saipan with General LeMay. General LeMay, he was, experienced in in Europe with, bomb groups, and then he took over. And the first thing he said was, we are not going to be doing 30, 000 feet anymore. The planes are going to fly at a much lower altitude, which would be 10,000 feet, in some cases 5, 000 feet. And he also said

that there'll be no promotions and no decorations and the crews that are there, are going to be there until the war ends. It's not going to be the 25 missions that was prior to General LeMay. Well, and these bombing raids, 5 percent or else 5 planes would not return. And if you do the math, you've got 100 after 20. 20 times 5 equals 100. So, if you've flown 20 missions, you've still got 5 more to go. And he said that these crews are going to stay until the war ends. And that's what would happen. And then he also said that since the Japanese were not having as many fighters anymore, he was going to leave all the gunners back at base and not carry any ammunition at all. And the ammunition for all of the guns weighed about 2,000 pounds. So what it means is that instead of the 10,000 pounds that the plane was designed for, you could increase it by leaving the personnel. Plus the ammunition at home and two extra bombs.

Interviewer (03:24:07) - Huh, so his strategy really changed how, how the war kind of was carried out.

Melvin Price (03:24:14) - Well when I look at it, I almost feel that he was sending us out to be killed.

Interviewer (03:24:24) - Yeah

Melvin Price (03:24:25) - That's really what it amounts to, because all of these, well, in fact, behind me was a steel plate, armor plate, it was about three quarters thick, and it was about six foot tall, and that was taken out also.

Interviewer (03:24:46) - That's terrifying. So, is there anything I haven't asked you about that you want to make sure that we have for our record?

Melvin Price (03:24:58) - I don't know what, you've covered everything.

End of Interview