

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: Fred Applegath

Interviewer: Rebecca Snow

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[0:04]

R: So, Mr. Applegath, welcome to the library. We're glad to have you here. And just for the record, my name is Rebecca Snow and I work at the library, Moore Memorial Library, and I'm interviewing Frederick? Fred?

F: Fred.

R: Fred Apple—

F: Applegath.

R: Mr. Fred Applegath on his experiences regarding World War II. And today is May 22?

F: Sounds good.

R: 2012. Okay. Can we start—can you just tell, like what was the year you actually came to Texas City?

F: With Monsanto.

R: Okay.

F: I was employed by Lion Oil, and Monsanto took them over, in El Dorado, Arkansas. And so I moved from there to here.

R: And I believe that was like in the 1960s? Early '60s?

F: '63, or somewhere in there.

R: And I know you've been a very important member of the community. We were glad to have you come. And so that's why we want to record what happened, even though you didn't experience the war from this point of view, from Texas City. So if you want to just fill us in a little bit about—

F: Well, the—

R: You came from Herrin, Illinois?

F: Oh, yes. That was in the Depression. Before—of course, way before microchips, and before Xerox, and all of that stuff. During the Depression that was a big—

R: So you grew up during the Depression.

F: Yes.

R: You experienced that firsthand. And so—but then you went to—what kind of place did you live on in Herrin?

F: Yes, the small town, coal mining town of Herrin, Illinois. After I graduated from high school, I went with my sister and brother-in-law to Detroit, to try to get a job or something. I ended up coming back home and going to Southern Illinois Normal University in Carbondale, which is a town nearby. I had a low or high, however you want to call it, draft number in World War II, and so I was able to finish my college degree. Then as soon as I got my degree, I volunteered to the Air Force.

R: Right. When Pearl Harbor happened in '41, you were already twenty-one, twenty-two.

F: Yes.

[3:36]

R: And you were in—so you were in college when Pearl Harbor happened?

F: That's right.

R: And how far away was the college from your hometown?

F: Twenty miles.

R: Okay. And so when Pearl Harbor happened, where were you then? You were in college, do you remember, like in December, were you still at the college at that time?

F: In my freshman and sophomore year, I commuted. I think this was in sophomore year. And so the talk in the car was all about what had happened.

R: Right. And the news came from like the radio?

F: Yes, yes.

R: Was your family surprised, do you think, or—

F: Yes. Yes.

R: And what was your feeling? Do you remember how you felt as a young man, about the war when it was starting? Did you want us to get in?

F: I had reached the stage, that it didn't make any difference what I thought. I knew things were going to happen after that. And so I really didn't have strong feelings, evidently, about against it or for it, because I had just assumed that's the way life is.

R: Just experienced it. Right.

F: Yes.

R: Right. In the university, I mean at the college, was the name of it Southeastern—

F: Southern Illinois Normal University. It's a teacher's college.

R: It was a university. Okay. Did you notice that it affected the professors, the classes? Did you remember any rallies, anything like that?

F: No, no.

R: No.

F: I mean, there were none.

R: And they didn't have to come on campus and recruit, because the recruitment was all set up.

F: Oh, no.

R: And what was your major?

F: Chemistry and math. Now, may I sort of take over or something, is this okay? Talk about the things on my chest here? (Laughs.)

R: Yes.

[6:31]

F: (Pointing to his army coat, which he's wearing) There's a pilot's badge here, and an air medal, with two oak leaf clusters. And so if I can sort of just explain those.

R: Yes. That would be great.

F: I didn't enlist—yes, I enlisted after graduating from college. Then we had primary training, and secondary and then the third one. Primary training was in the smaller open cockpit plane, and we'd do acrobatics, and all that sort of stuff.

R: And how did you decide that you were going to go into flying?

F: Oh, I didn't decide. When I volunteered, it was whatever they wanted me to do.

R: But you must have taken some tests.

F: Yes. And since it was a special volunteer opportunity, then there was sort of the assumption that we would be allowed to at least try out for flying.

R: You mean because you were not really drafted.

F: Right. We still had options.

R: And where did you have to go to actually be—to sign up?

F: Seems like it was Peoria, or some—I don't know. It was several miles away.

R: And they gave you some tests, and they said, "What about flying?"

F: Flying, or whatever they wanted to assign me.

R: Or navigator?

F: Yes. Frequently, the ones that couldn't pass flying, for some reason, would make maybe a navigator, or something else.

R: Or some kind of gunner?

F: Yes.

R: So you had primary training. Where was that?

F: That was in Saxton, Missouri.

[9:00]

We flew an open cockpit plane. The main thing was—at the primary place, was soloing. In other words, (laughs) getting the instructor to have enough confidence in you that you could fly the plane and bring it back without crashing. And I'll tell you, maybe twenty percent of the ones never made it through there. Most of them had utmost confidence in their skills, and they distrusted the laws of gravity and the other physical laws. Whereas I'd had some physics courses in college, and I trusted those implicitly, but my own skill, I wasn't so sure about. So anyway, I had no trouble soloing and—I don't know—

R: Can I ask you, "open cockpit"—what is "open cockpit"—what does that mean? I mean, I know what the cockpit is. Why (unintelligible)?

F: There isn't any cover.

R: No cover.

F: That's right. Nothing over your head.

R: Is that specifically, was that for a purpose?

F: Oh, yes. Cheap. Light.

R: Not to just make you more aware of the elements.

F: Well, no. (Rebecca laughs) So, little did I know—

R: Were you afraid when you flew?

F: I was going to say, no, not that the law of gravity was going to fail, or anything like that. As long as I could keep the plane moving I would have (unintelligible). Anyway, by me soloing early, I didn't realize it, but that was the high point (laughs) of my flying career. (laughs) From that primary to the next one, I was never in the upper fifty percent of skill.

R: How did you happen to solo early?

F: Well, I just—

R: You were just ready for it.

F: I had confidence. The plane wasn't going to fall down.

R: So you were successful.

F: Then after the third thing, for the third school, they divided you into those that were going to go into bombers, transports, or something and those that were going to go into fighters. By size, if nothing else, I was going to go into the larger planes. Originally, the Army Air Force, I think they had one or two-inch height leeway. You were either 5'10" or 5'11". Well, I was 6'4". So they were running pretty far down the list to take me.

[12:24]

R: To take you to be actually a bomber pilot?

F: I didn't know what I was going to be after I got out. But when I graduated, I was assigned to the airfield up at Austin. And there I met the DC-3 civil version of the C-47. Which was an old plane, old in use, at that time. And very stable, easy on the pilot and all. From there, that transition school, in Austin. I went to a specific 90th squadron of the 438th Group of Troop Transport. Our training was for D-Day, or the night before D-Day. Paratroop drop.

R: Okay. So you got in then fairly later, in the war.

F: By the time we arrived in England, the Germans didn't control the air, we controlled the air. The Allies did, and we were in—

R: It's probably like, when was D-Day? '43? Looking at my dates here (looking at a paper). '44, sorry. So you went—that was in June, and so when did you get to England? Was it (unintelligible)?

F: It was snowing, and there was snow on the ground. In Texas, where we'd been training most of the time, railroads were landmarks. You know, on the map. Way over here, if you saw a railroad like that, then "Hey, that could be going from Austin to San Antonio. Yes, that's on the map, right here." Whereas in England, railroads were more like this. They weren't good landmarks because there so many of them. We got lost, we knew we were lost when we kept flying and flew out of the snow. We got to southern England and there wasn't any snow.

R: When you were training?

F: Yes.

R: When you first got there?

F: This is the first time we were up, the next day after we landed, after we had got to our airfield. We'd just [gone] up, a training flight, just flying around. We knew we were lost when we ran out of snow. We just circled and the radio operator said, "Mayday, mayday," and they directed us back. (Laughs.) We had a navigator with us but he was like we were. There were so many landmarks that we couldn't distinguish them from that. Anyway, we—

R: But navigators—yes I'm not aware of the science of it, of exactly how they did it. I know it was not an easy job. But, so he couldn't—it wasn't just looking at landmarks, though, wasn't it? It was also looking at readings, compass readings, or—

F: Sightings on stars.

R: Okay.

F: We flew—to get to England, we flew down to South America, Belem, and then Ascension Island in the Atlantic Ocean, and then from there to Africa, and from Africa on up around Spain, and to England. And to do this, those long flights, we didn't have passengers. Well, I think we had one passenger, and a big gas tank in the cabin (laughs) that allowed us to make these long flights.

R: So this was a flight—you mean you actually, when you went over to England, you didn't go by ship.

F: No.

[17:12]

R: You flew. Your plane. You flew this DC—

F: 3. That was a C47. Yes. It's a two-motor, retractable landing wheels, but stationary tail wheel. It may have come out in 1927, or something. The original version was really old.

R: But you became—actually you were a pilot?

F: Yes.

R: Not a member of the—you're not the navigator, the—

F: No. I was the copilot, on this.

R: You were copilot for going over.

F: Yes, and most of the time, later on.

R: What was your rank?

F: Started out as a second lieutenant, and made first lieutenant. Now, I'll bring out my piece of paper (looks at paper).

R: So you actually flew from Texas, by different stops—

F: Yes.

R: Across the Atlantic, down to Africa across the Atlantic.

F: Now in the middle of the Atlantic, there was Ascension Island.

R: And then over to Africa, and then up. There wasn't any danger from the Italians?

F: We had complete air control. As you said, this was pretty late in the war, and—

R: But still, must have been the winter of '43-'44, or early '44? There was still snow. What's this?

F: Yes. Here's a paper that's interesting from two standpoints, what it says and then this is the—this isn't a Xerox, it's a photocopy. I'd intended to bring the original paper, but you couldn't read it. The paper had turned as yellow as this, and some of the letters had been shuffled off. This was what we were training for. The night before D-Day, about ten o'clock that night, we took off from our airfield along with all the other planes on our airfield. About midnight, we got to the drop zone. For the first time, I saw machine gun fire that had tracers, tracer bullets. Our plane, course, didn't have any armor, that would make it too heavy, but we had a, say, 3/8th inch steel plate just under, on our seat. And when I saw those tracers coming around, boy I scootched around like (laughs)—we had a—

R: Did you have any guns? Were there guns on the plane?

F: We had pistols, I think. But luckily, we didn't have any guns, we'd have probably shot each other.

R: No, this looks great. (Reading from the paper.) It says, "...fearlessly approaching their objectives, through a barrage of anti-aircraft fire..." So you were the copilot?

F: Yes.

R: Was the team already intact, in the United States?

[21:10]

F: No. Maybe fifteen percent, or maybe twenty-five, I don't know. Something like that. So that planes and people were added, for the time that we were training in England. The purpose of the troop carrier outfit, was specifically this paratroop drop and glider towing. And—

R: What were the gliders for?

F: They could carry jeeps, and small cannons, as well as men. So the next day, after D-Day, we—

R: They would be gliders that they would be used like in the ocean? You mean, to bring in machinery? I'm sorry. Because gliders, you mean, you were towing them, but then they were going to be used over there?

F: Okay.

R: I'm sorry, I'm ignorant on this.

F: There was a main beach, I've forgotten its name, that was really—that had the possibility of being a good big port. Now, Omaha Beach didn't have these possibilities, and so it was probably not as well-defended, it certainly wasn't as well-defended. Our troops had landed there, and by the second day, there was enough space that these planes—they were just airplanes without motors—they had nylon ropes going from our plane to the glider. And when we got over the landing place, we just cut them loose and—they cut loose first, and then we'd cut loose just to get rid of this dangling rope.

R: So you were increasing the invasion by having these—

F: Yes, maybe having some jeeps and stuff—the paratroop drop was all behind the lines. You know what I mean, it wasn't on the beach, it was way back all the way up [to] the Cherbourg peninsula. And—

R: How far away was that from land?

F: That was land.

R: Okay, that was land. But it wasn't near the beach?

F: No.

R: It was south?

F: It was inland.

R: Oh, actually inland. So you didn't drop on the beach.

F: Oh no, no.

R: See, I'm sorry, I don't know these things. I've seen my movies, and I've seen them running up the beach, and then they—but they're coming in with the troop (unintelligible) you know.

F: Well but, that's how it happened, but it wasn't the paratroopers.

R: But the paratroopers were different, right.

F: They were definitely inland. That, of course was—they were behind the German lines. That—

R: Terribly dangerous. Yes.

[24:31]

F: Dangerous for both the paratroopers and the Germans. (Laughs.)

R: Oh.

F: Let's see.

R: So when they came down, they were already firing? Or they—

F: Well, first thing they'd have to do is get out of their chute. And one of them got stuck on the steeple of the church in Sainte-Mere-Église, that's a place in—unfortunate tragedy. They caused a lot of turmoil, by being behind the lines.

R: Right. And so, on D-Day, you went and you just dropped a group? Like how many—

F: Well, there were twenty-eight paratroopers per plane. Seems to me like, we were the first group. And we had, I don't know, five thousand paratroopers. And there were nine hundred planes behind us.

And you can imagine this stream—so that, flying formation, getting close to the other plane, that if you'd strayed away, it's like going around, see my hands when I turn: (demonstrating) Boy, this one's really moving forward, and this one's going backwards. (Laughs.) Well, if you're bringing the planes in, in tight formation, it'd be more like this. (demonstrates)

And we only had say go from ninety miles an hour speed to hundred and twenty. So tight formation was really important. I don't know whether you've ever been driving, and had a big truck just get on your bumper and scare you to death, they stayed so close. But that driver would have been the perfect troop carrier plane pilot. (Laughs.)

R: So you're talking what, just the aero-dynamics.

F: No, I'm talking about the skill of the driver.

R: Being able to come in, to be able to travel together so closely.

F: That's right, in such—

R: It made it more—

F: Such a cumbersome vehicle. Whereas a normal person would say, "I need about fifty feet, this thing can't stop on a dime." That person would have been an ideal troop carrier pilot. And I wasn't that person.

R: Why did you have to be so close to each other? Because they wanted to drop them close to each other?

F: We've got nine hundred planes following us.

R: Ah.

F: This is at midnight, when we're at the drop zone. They had to get out of there before D-Day, first sunlight. And also, just getting lined up and on the way, and making these turns, because getting out at the edge caused all sorts of problems.

[28:28]

R: Of course, right. So you're saying you wouldn't be able to do that, but you were the copilot, you were there ready to fly.

F: That's right.

R: If you had to?

F: And as a result, I never was picked to pilot a flight on any of the future operations. They had pretty good sense. (Chuckles.) I was the copilot. And the pay, and the rank, the group leader—

R: Squadron leader.

F: 438, his ultimate rank could go as high as a one-star general. The squadron leader, his rank could go as high as a colonel. The flight—the three, and then two threes on each side of that—and the one that flew this three, could be a lieutenant colonel. And the ones that flew this three and this three could be majors. And the copilot on this one could be first lieutenant. So that's what I ended up as. That explains where I ended up in the rank.

Now, one of the oak leaf clusters was—during the winter, the next winter after our getting lost, the Germans made a breakthrough. There was bad weather and fighter planes couldn't immediately help them out, and so we flew in, dropped some, whatever

they were needing, to this group. And so I had the next oak leaf cross, cluster. Then in between times, we could fly patients from field hospitals back to main hospitals, even back to Europe, back to England.

R: You went back to England. So you were flying in Europe, after D-Day you were flying in Europe, still the scene of battle?

F: Yes.

R: Where was your base? Where did you take—

F: We stayed in England quite a long time, and finally moved to France, in Amiens, I think it was. Then Patton had a tank division or something—anyway, he was noted for tanks, but couldn't keep up the supply of gasoline. So we loaded our planes with these cans of gasoline, and flew into these grass fields, near where his tanks were, and supplied him with gasoline.

R: Where was that now, was that Africa? No. Italy?

F: No, no, this was in France someplace, or Netherlands, no, not the Netherlands—it was in France.

R: It was in France, okay.

[32:17]

F: Yes.

R: And so, just regular gasoline containers?

F: I've forgotten the name of these, they're common things, they're sort of like rectangular and about like this. (gesturing)

R: Right. I would say cans, but I'm sure there's probably a term I'm thinking of.

F: For this, he would supply wines, champagnes. I think I got a total of about four bottles of various things. Then the next operation was trying to get control of four bridges. There was a movie made of this, "A Bridge Too Far".

R: But I didn't see it. Yes. But I've heard of it.

F: They—"they" being the powers that be, realized the inefficiencies of our paratroop drop. That at night things were all confusing, and all, so this was going to be a daytime operation. The units could be cohesive and everything go smooth.

Well, there were four bridges. Of course, the one closest to Germany had the most defenses and interests of the Germans and all. So that one, they received, I don't know, ten percent casualties. But we were on about the third one. We didn't have any trouble at all dropping our paratroopers, maybe gliders too, I don't know what we were doing there.

But, it might have been more efficient, but it was also more efficient for the Germans. (Laughs.) There was no surprise at all. They could count the people dropping down there. The powers that be didn't follow up with land troops. So the first ones to evacuate and lose, either evacuate or be taken prisoner or killed, were the bridge closest to Germany. And then the rest of them—ours I think was the Rhinemagen (?) bridge.

R: Uh-huh. So, as the copilot, what were your duties?

F: Well, I would fly the plane some, particularly in taking off gliders. There was a lot of signaling going on.

[35:40]

R: And talking with the navigator—where you were, where you were going to—because he didn't talk to you, they had the radio system in the plane?

F: We didn't have a lot of radios, see. That's what I was trying to say, that radios had to have tubes, they didn't have these chips.

R: Well, right. They were tubes, and so they weren't built into maybe this older plane? I don't know. Because, I think, the bombers—didn't they always have—

F: Yes. But the bombers, because of the—well, now I'm getting off the subject—had throat mikes, that the high altitude didn't conduct sound well from your mouth to a mike, so they just had throat mikes. But, what does a radio do? He's sitting here, I'm sitting here.

R: Okay. So you didn't really need it. Dropping paratroopers, my dad flew transport in the Pacific, but wasn't there a special routine, to drop actual people, right?

F: Right. (Clears throat.)

R: Did you want some water?

F: No. I'm about to run out(unintelligible)—

R: I'm making you talk a lot, I know.

F: There was a line down the plane ceiling. And the paratroopers would hook their string, their rope or string onto that, and at the signal, they would jump singly out of the plane. The parachute would be automatically opened. At five hundred feet, they would roll, they would go flying.

R: Wow. Right. And how slow would you be going when you dropped the—

F: About eighty miles an hour. Any—if you go slower than that, the plane would be real mushy and hard to control.

R: But how about the firing? You must have gotten fired at.

F: Oh yes, we had holes in our plane wing.

R: Did you lose some of your crew sometimes?

F: The losses were very small. I don't know whether you've ever tried shooting (laughs) glass jugs with a rifle, you throw it up and a .22—

R: I've seen people do it, yes.

F: It's very difficult to hit them.

[39:00]

A plane, at that low altitude, you don't have a very good angle on, I mean—

R: Ah, so, actually being down was to your advantage. And what did you think about being in England, how did you like that?

F: I was impressed.

R: Did you have any trouble understanding the people, their accent, the way they talked?

F: Not really, no.

R: And did you all fly with the British, or you were separate?

F: Oh, we were quite separate.

R: Separate. But you were able to go into town—

F: But we had some of the British gliders, they had huge ones. We could pull two of ours, but just one of theirs.

R: And so for D-Day, the British were in on that, too, right?

F: Oh yes.

R: But you didn't work right with them.

F: No, we had self-sufficient fields, of one group to one field—airfield.

R: Did you go into the towns and meet any of the people or have a—

F: Oh yes. I had a—met a girlfriend. But that was a different time and age (laughs), quite different.

R: Well, different expectations than the young people have today.

F: Yes.

R: Right. So you were probably pretty honorable.

F: (Laughs.)

R: But nobody you wanted to meet after the war, when you came home?

F: No, it was one of those things—before we left England and moved to France, well, it was still an indeterminate period and all. If it had been leaving from there, it might have been different, but you know, being—

R: If you were actually going home that way, yes.

F: Yes.

R: To make a decision, or thinking—yes.

F: Now, the pilot that I flew with in all the missions, was a Southern gentleman, where that term means everything good and nothing of the bad part. He had grown up in Louisiana, small town in the north part of Louisiana, during the Depression. Had gotten a job as a shoe salesman, which, getting a job then, that was something and all. Very personable fella. He had an English girl, that had aspersions (laughs) of class. Near the end of the war, he was a major, and his salary was the equivalent of that of a British general.

R: Wow.

F: Salary differences. And we had a got a flying bonus, as well. Anyway, after the war, she and her mother flew to Louisiana and he may have gone to England. Anyway, she had no desire (Laughs) to end up in Louisiana, and he ended up committing suicide.

R: I'm so sorry. You mean, actually, because of the situation, maybe?

F: Yes. That's a sad note to end on.

[43:15]

R: That's very sad. Yes, and I don't want to keep you too long. I just wanted to—I heard that the British, the other armies were quite amazed at how well-equipped—the kind of food you ate and the equipment that you had—that the Americans had. But you weren't working right next to them to compare, but did you feel like, did you sense any kind of—were they always welcoming us, even though we were late coming in?

F: I think they gave us as much respect as we deserved, let's put it that way. (Both laugh.) One of the things—some of us played poker. The winner was very well-financed, as you might say.

There was a motorcycle that somebody had dredged up someplace. It was a BMW motorcycle. So I bought it for three hundred pounds. A pound then was four dollars. This had been a misused motorcycle anyway. I wanted to visit a hometown buddy at an airfield nearby. Had some hills to go over, and boy, I'd have to push the thing up the hill, it wasn't running very well.

I took it to one of the local motorcycle shops, and boy I didn't receive any good reception. (Laughs.) It was only until after the war I realized BMW isn't British motor

works, it's Bavarian motor works, it's a German motorcycle. And here these guys had been rained on with bombs, and shortages of everything!

R: Right, exactly.

F: The same way, I don't like fish much. One of the big hotels, Clarendon or something, in London, went there for dinner. Outside of fish, the only thing they had was powdered eggs. (Laughs.) So I had these green powdered eggs with silverware from here to there, and here to there.

R: At the Clarendon House, right, I've heard of that. Oh my gosh. So they really were affected. It's hard to say, but how do you think being in the war changed you? What do you think (unintelligible)?

F: I think it not only changed me, but a lot of people. The people—not in Paris, or big cities, but out in the boondocks, in France and Belgium. They had a wave of German armies coming through, a wave of Allies coming through—they had survived all get-out, and I think that emphasized the feeling of, "Hey, we don't want this, any war on our soil. Fight them before they get that far. Fight them someplace else." That is terrible.

R: Definitely. To see that first-hand, to see what they were going through. Well, I hope I haven't kept you a long, long time.

F: Oh, I enjoyed talking about it.

R: I, very much—it's been very instructive for me, and we would definitely like, probably, at least I would like to take a copy of this (reference to paper).

F: Okay, and say, that's not a Xerox, Xerox wasn't available back in World War II.

R: Exactly.

F: A photocopy, I think.

R: Okay. Well, thank you very much Mr. Applegath. I think we'll stop it here.

[47:55]