

Ruel Lehman Jr.

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Interviewed by Leah Cohen

Transcribed by Matthew Gipson [with You Tube captioning]

Edited by Leah Cohen

Web biography by Leah Cohen

Produced by Brad Guidera, Angel Melendez

Cohen: Today is November 26th, 2019. My name is Leah Cohen. On behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I have the pleasure of interviewing Second [i.e.,¹ First] Lieutenant Ruel Lehman Jr who served with 379th Bomb Group of the 8th Air Force on the European front during World War II. Uh-before I ask questions, Mr. Lehman will talk about some articles and photos that he has here.

Lehman: Very well, uh, I'm Ruel Lehman and I did wind up as the First Lieutenant, by the way, at the end of my tour but I flew most of my missions as a Second Lieutenant co-pilot before I became a first pilot. I might comment first, in humor, here's an article that appeared in the **Chicago Tribune** with a very good photo of a B-17 [Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress] and it's one of the later models which are the ones I flew. You can tell by this nose turret under here [showing photo]. This, the models were also labeled by letter and the F [B-17F] and G [B-17G] models have the gun turret here [showing picture]. Prior models did that, but the most amusing part of this article, now this one crashed recently, and they say there's only nine left in flying condition but the fun part of this article is that a so-called expert is quoted as saying, "No one alive flew or went through the military training program for this aircraft".

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: But that's a lie.

Cohen: That's a lie.

Lehman: I'm here and I and I'm sure there's quite a few others also.

Cohen: [Laughs]. It's very interesting that you brought up the nose because my colleague, Paul Grasmehr, also told me that the later models had that turret underneath so that the pilot and co-pilot would be less vulnerable to direct attack. Was that your impression as well?

¹ Lehman rank was that of First Lieutenant. Cohen spoke erroneously.

Lehman: Well, I'm sure that was part of it and one of the Nazi Luftwaffe [German Air Force] techniques was to attack from the front because we had inadequate armament facing that way. So that was it, ya know, it wasn't just the pilots is what I'm getting at. The whole crew. By the way I also have here a write-up at this institution which used to be called, "Holley" before it became Brookdale. We have a periodical that our residents publish. I think it's every second month and sometimes they feature one of the residents. This one happened to be me, so it's kind of an account of what we're talking about here.

Cohen: Thank you, I'll take a...

Lehman: If you're interested.

Cohen: I'll take a picture of it.

Lehman: No you can keep that copy if you...

Cohen: Oh I can keep it. Well, well, then thank you

Lehman: Okay, now I explain this material? If you're interested.

Cohen: Yes.

Lehman: [showing photos]. This is our crew. Unfortunately, it's the only picture I have of our full crew. I do have two other pictures one here and one there, yeah, a part of the crew including me. This guy, by my thumb [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: Okay, this was the Air Medal with five clusters award for combat service. That's the emblem that's on the hat. That's just part of the adornment of the uniform. This was not government issue, it's a silk glove but I had been told and I followed through that you're flying, our raids were generally at twenty-seven, 27000 feet high or thereabouts, five mile high. It's usually minus 30 or minus 40 up there. We had gloves that were electrically heated, when they worked, but when they didn't they were also pretty well muffled but we had to take them off occasionally to adjust instruments. So this was the help there. Not government issue I just did that on my own.

Cohen: Where did you buy them?

Lehman: Pardon me?

Cohen: Where did you buy the silk gloves?

Lehman: Buy the gloves. Ya know, I don't know but whoever, at the time, sold funeral and wedding, [Lehman laughs], equipment [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: I think that's what it was. Dog tags you're familiar with that. The Air Force emblem, the wings. This is a piece of flak, which was our bitter enemy flak. That's kind of an elongated view of a B-17 on the attack. These were recognition medals. This was, I think, the queen visiting our airfield. It didn't happen while I was there but we had a picture of it. Another view, not a very good one, of B-17 in flight.

Cohen: Formation.

Lehman: Here's the second lieutenant bar and the first lieutenant bar. Another flight picture: Here's a German belt buckle that I didn't get directly but a friend of mine, who served in Central Europe, gave it to me as a present. Another picture of me and ya know I'm not sure what that is. Obviously an aiming few through through one of our, for one of our guns but I didn't operate the guns so I [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: So maybe a friend gave it to you?

Lehman: Yeah, right. No no I think I may have taken the picture but I just don't remember what part of the plane. It looks like a gun sight that's all I can tell. So that's the story there.

Cohen: Did you get the piece of flak from the plane itself? Like the piece, like after the plane was attacked with flak were there little bits of that...

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: Came into the plane or water?

Lehman: I think this came out of our, of our plane.

Cohen: Plane, yeah.

Lehman: But it's so long ago I don't remember how I got it but flak was our bitter enemy. When I got there, which was two and a half months after D-Day [Normandy Invasion], we begin to have air control. I'll get into that a little later on the fighter planes that help protect us. We were called a Flying Fortress, but the B-17 was no fortress. We were shooting multiple 50 caliber machine guns, which is

reasonably powerful, but they were shooting at us with 20-millimeter cannon and if that hit us, that was it, ya know. So we needed fighter support. Early in the game, the fighters didn't have the range to accompany us far enough toward the target. They could get us over the channel [English Channel] and a little bit into France but that was it. Then they'd have to turn back and the plane of the B-17s and B-24s [Consolidated B-24 Liberator], which was the other four-engine bomber would have to go on by themselves and get massacred, in many cases. When I got there, the German still had their fighter force, but it was considerably reduced, and we didn't worry about fighter attacks so much although it did occur from time to time... I think their flak, if anything, had improved. Flak was a fascinating kind of thing, in a way, ya know they were shooting from the ground, I believe with 88-millimeter cannon and the very first bursts of flak we were five miles high or so. Would be within a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet of us. I don't know how they judged it that well, but we had then one raid 300 flak holes at our plane. [On another raid], and our tail gunner was hit. He was the only crew member hit in one of the raids. So that was our enemy - "that piece of" flak.

Cohen: Well, I noticed that you had written, on the pre-interview questionnaire, that the bursts of flak was what was typified or exemplified your service.

Lehman: That's right, right and by the way there was a certain fascination to it. If it was far enough away, by that I mean 200 feet or more, it was it was interesting, I'm sorry to say. Of course you begin to pray and wouldn't get any closer and when it did a hundred feet you could see the orange burst which was almost like watching a fireworks parade.

Cohen: Yeah.

Lehman: And, ya know, you still didn't seem so bothered but all of a sudden you heard a burst and normally, you didn't you didn't hear at a hundred or 200 feet away cause of the noise of the end of your engines but all of a sudden you hear a burst and you feel a plane move you know you've been hit somewhere and that's when you start praying and no longer admiring the show.

Cohen: [laughs] Right. The show is over

Lehman: Okay.

Cohen: So we'll begin at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Lehman: I was born in Newark, New Jersey. I don't generally confess that, but I will under the circumstances but when I was four years old my parents moved to Oak Park, Illinois where I've lived off and on all these years.

Cohen: What was it like growing up in Oak Park, at the time?

Lehman: Very stable as I think back. I think particularly contrasted with today's world. I think you have to worry about little kids walking around by themselves. We did that all the time with no concern. Very stable and a good school system. I, in retrospect, enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I did at the time.

Cohen: [laughs]. What was the occupation of your parents?

Lehman: My father was an engineer. He graduated in...I think it was the 1910 engineering engineering class of University of Illinois.

[Phone ringing]

Lehman: [answering phone]. Hello? Yes, Scott. No I'm having an interview now. You know, I'll call you later in the day okay. Very good, bye.

Cohen: Oh so you're talking about your father that he been an engineer.

Lehman: Oh yeah, he was one of the very early engineering class graduates at the University of Illinois in electrical engineering. I had a picture once, I think there were about fifteen graduates, at that time. Electrical engineering was a relatively new occupation and he went with General Electric in the lamp division and, and ran, eventually, a... lamp warehouse in the city of Chicago.

Cohen: Wow, that's impressive that he began to work as an electrical engineer like shortly after electricity was discovered.

Lehman: Yeah, right, right.

Cohen: Were there members of your family who served in the military?

Lehman: No.

Cohen: Okay and what were your interests as a kid or as a teenager?

Lehman: My interests were sports. As I got a little older I became very much into scouting. Became an Eagle Scout eventually and enjoyed it. Feel like I got a lot out of it - that was pretty much an uneventful but pleasurable childhood.

Cohen: What do you feel you got out of the Eagle Scout activities?

Lehman: Well it introduced me to a variety of subjects that I never otherwise would have cared about. For example, one of the merit badges had to do with trees, identifying various trees: oak tree, oak tree, elm tree, and so forth and that's something I would pay no attention to. Also birds you get a merit badge for proficiency and knowing and identifying various birds. There again I would have no inclination to study that if it weren't for scouting requiring a certain number of merit badges for to become an eagle and so it, and also by the way some fundamental medical advice. Ya know, how to make bandages, how to control a broken limb stuff like that. Again, which I would have had no interest in otherwise.

Cohen: So interesting, so it made you aware of things that you wouldn't have been inclined toward, otherwise?

Lehman: Right, right.

Cohen: Interesting.

Lehman: Also associating with other kids, of course, in scouting. I became a patrol leader and then a senior patrol leader and experience and administrative activity of sorts.

Cohen: Yeah, wow that's interesting. So one thing you wrote in the biographical questionnaire is that, "World War II was the greatest threat to civilization during my lifetime. We wanted to be part of the resistance to Hitler." So how did you and your friends, your family become aware of the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany? When, when did you become more aware of that reality?

Lehman: Well it was all over the media at the time. The newspaper, the radio, and, of course, we were well aware of the early parts preceding the war. By that I mean the war in Spain in which the Germans, for example, contributed certain airplanes and other mechanism as a matter of testing them for their own future use; that was the Spanish War and of course World War II started what around 1940 when the Germans invaded the first Czechoslovakia and then Poland and was the Polish invasion that brought in France and England because they'd made a pact to do that, if necessary and we were very much aware of that reading all about it and then of course came Pearl Harbor. It was the only war in my lifetime where many guys, maybe even most guys, wanted to get in and do their part. Every other war I know of, young guys would maneuver to try to stay out of it. At least, they would be tempted to do that. World War II, I know guys, personally, not one but several, that maneuvered to get in it. The guy that I went over to England as first as the co-pilot-- became a first pilot later -- but the guy that was my first pilot during most of my missions was a star example. He worked at the beginning of the war for Boeing in Seattle, Washington. I think he had no

education beyond high school, if that, but he and his buddies wanted to get in so bad that they went to the local air force recruiting station and tried to apply but when the recruiter discovered they work for Boeing he said, "We can't take you. You work for a war munition manufacturer, so they went back and resigned!" [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: And he was warned by one of his friends who had done it, signed up with the Air Force prior to this occasion that he needed to be heavy on math which he didn't have much, so he went and got himself tutored in math just so he could pass the test, which he did and he wasn't the only one. I had another good friend who had allergies and he they kept rejecting him until he applied again and lied about his medical history to get in and by the way, miraculously when he got in his allergy disappeared. I don't know...I don't think he ever did know how that happened but it did.

Cohen: Became a truth.

Lehman: Yeah, yeah, but anyway we all felt that it was an important war, you know. The world kind of depended on it and we wanted to make a contribution.

Cohen: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Lehman: No I, you know I don't. You think, I must have been I must have been at the University of Michigan because I had a year and a half of college education there and so that's where I was I'm sure when, when Pearl Harbor attack. Now exactly where I was I might even have been in my dormitory room studying when it happened.

Cohen: So I believe you wrote that you had enlisted to the forces, to the [US] Army and you spoke about the motivation of others and yourselves to want to do their bit, your bit. So, of curiosity, why did you choose the Army versus the [US] Navy or the [US] Marines?

Lehman: Well, I had mixed emotions at the time. I want to get in as much college study as I could, on the one hand, but on the other hand I wanted to contribute. I didn't like the idea of ground service. Anything resembling trench warfare was an anathema to me and I also had a minimal interest but a definite minimal interest in learning to fly. That sounded great so I went for the Army Air Force [United States Army Air Corps] which was called it that, I'm sorry it was called the Army Air Corps at that time later became the Air Force. So I signed up, I think it was about November 1942, it must have been. I signed up for the reserve but they

didn't call us for several months. So that's the best I can do as to how I picked that branch of service.

Cohen: Interesting and had you completed your semester of school, like or did you have to leave in mi-middle?

Lehman: I had completed one year...I started at Michigan in the fall of 1941 and I finished the '41 '42 school year and I had started the fall '42 '43 year when I enlisted and I made that semester 'cause they didn't call me till, I think it was February of '43. So I had a year and a half a college, yeah. And as I say I had mixed emotions I do I really want to stay and get more or do I want to get involved and of course once I signed up with the reserve I was subject to they're calling, which they did in I think about February of '43.

Cohen: Well what were you studying at the University of Michigan?

Lehman: I went to Michigan in order to study law. They had a good law school and they had a combined curriculum which would permit you to get a law degree if you passed in six years rather than seven and for some re-and I don't know why I was so anxious to expedite this thing but I was. So that was a big attraction. Also they had a beautiful p...

Cohen: [coughing]

Lehman: Physical facility for the law school that was an attraction to, as well as, a good reputation but the war did the o- did the opposite for me and what it did for many guys. Many guys got serious after the war. I was serious before the war and kind of a playboy afterwards, so to speak, and I didn't want to go through all the time it would take to study law, so I switched to the business school.

Cohen: So did you feel like after this, you know the difficulty of war, you felt one needed to enjoy the day-to-day more or--?

Lehman: I think that was part of it. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cohen: Interesting. So your, you were actually called up, I think you said in...

Lehman: I think I think it was February of '43.

Cohen: Where did you do your basic training?

Lehman: They, I was loaded onto a train in Chicago headed for Fresno, California and at the time people didn't travel anything like they do today. The idea of going to California had a certain romantic appeal, ya know. We were saying on the train,

“Gee, we may get to see some movie stars”, and well we ended up at Fresno on the rainy season and basic training, all we did was exercise and somebody said it had been a Japanese prison camp and I never did understand what that is. I’d like to know if there were some way of finding out.

Cohen: Well just to say, when I did a little background reading, I read that it had been like a kind of collection center for the Japanese, I guess before they were sent to the particular internment camps.

Lehman: Okay.

Cohen: One thing I was wondering about whether you or the others knew about knew about knew about it or not?

Lehman: Well, we had heard there’d been a Japanese prison camp and I was so naive and out of it politically that, you know, I didn't have much interest at the time. [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: But what you just told me is helpful. I'm quite interested today. In fact one of my fellow officers that the gas company had been in such a camp. He was Jap-Japanese inheritance but I was always afraid to talk to him because I thought maybe the subject -- I mean about about that -- I thought, maybe, it was too tender a subject, but he died a few years ago. So I've lost my chance to ask him about it.

Cohen: Well, many others have written about it.

Lehman: Yeah, yeah, anyway we were only there about a month or six weeks doing push-ups and all kinds of other physical exercises in the rain and the mud in Fresno. By the way, I don't mean to do Fresno in. I happened to be there a year later, temporarily during my training process. One month later in March and it was absolutely beautiful. Just a beautiful spot and I thought, “Wow, this isn’t the Fresno I remembered”, but it was great.

Cohen: Did you do a lot of marching?

Lehman: Pardon me?

Cohen: Did you do a lot of marching?

Lehman: Yeah we did a lot of marching. Yeah and stuff like that but they still weren't ready for us in the formal flight training. So after Fresno basic training they sent

me and a number of others to the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, [North Dakota] and gave us studies that presumably were related to flight training, ya know. The only one that really seemed directly related to me was a little introductory French, in case we were shot down, in France and I don't remember any of it today except we learned the La Marseillaise or however you pronounce it and a few words in French just so we could try to identify ourselves if we were shot down.

Cohen: But Mr. Lehman, I would have thought that there'd be courses on the theory of flight with math and physics...

Lehman: You would think so, wouldn't you? [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: We, I think did have a little physics and some math, we did have that. They were kind of interesting courses but, yeah, nothing, nothing directly related to flight training.

Cohen: So how long did this period last of taking courses?

Lehman: You know, I...I'm vague on that. I think it was maybe three, two or three months something like that and finally, they were ready for us in the flight school. Oh by the way, we did get while at Grand Forks I think ten hours of flight training which is the first time the first time I ever was up in an airplane. I might have flown commercially before that; I can't remember but first time I was ever up as a...getting flight instruction. It was a little Aeronca like a Piper Cub. Two-seater with the instructor and us. So we had ten hours of flying there which was, at least, an attempted at some introduction but finally, they were ready for us in the formal flight school, so I was sent back to Santa Ana, California for pre-flight training.

Cohen: So before we move on to preflight training, was there some kind of triage process where they would decide, "Okay, Mr. Lehman you you'll be trained to be a co-pilot, you'll be trained to be a bomber..."

Lehman: No, no, no, no, this was just to get us to fly. Thought I had a picture of it somewhere but I don't see it, oh. [Flipping through photos]. This is – well, this isn't gonna help me it was a there was a two-seater plane, training plane, again, with an instructor in one seat and the student in another. We had- I'm sorry I'm skipping ahead; that's not pre-flight. The pre-flight we had no we didn't get in planes, at all, it was two months of ground instruction on navigation how to navigate and there we did get some instruction on how planes work and why

they fly and stuff like that. It was pretty demanding but that was two months there.

Cohen: That was at Santa Ana [Santa Ana Army Air Base in Santa Ana, California]?

Lehman: Santa Ana, yeah and then... we went to primary training and here's where we first got an official flight training in in an Aeronca [aircraft manufacturer's name]. I'm sorry not an Aeronca. A Ryan PT-22, I think it was called, training plane, and there we learned in essence to fly that kind of an airplane. Two months there and then...

Cohen: How many engines were in the Ryan PT?

Lehman: One, one in, yeah. From there after two months we went, I went to Bakersfield, California for what they called basic training and again, a one engine plane but more powerful and bigger, wait two months of flight training there and then finally, two months finally, in flight training, two months in Marfa, Texas. You've probably never heard of Marfa, Texas.

Cohen: Not before I saw your questionnaire.

Lehman: Yeah, you're, you're, in trouble, if you've ever heard of it cause it's in the middle of nowhere. It's in South West Texas completely by itself close to the Rio Grande and the movie **Giant** [1956 Film], I don't know if you've ever heard of it -- or Rock Hudson was in it and I think Elizabeth Taylor and I think it was Jimmy Dean or a name like that.

Cohen: Big names.

Lehman: I think it was his first big movie. That was filmed in Marfa, Texas. That's the only thing Marfa is famous for, but two months of what they called, "Advanced Flight Training" there and this time it was in a twin-engine plane. [Lehman shifting through photos]. I thought I'd easily find a picture here. At the end of each one of these flight training sessions, we'd get a book like this that...

Cohen: Oh I see, the one from Marfa, Texas, yeah.

Lehman: Yeah, then showed all of our instructors and eventually, pictures of us. I'm trying to find the picture of the plane. We call that the "Bamboo Bomber". That was just a joke.

Cohen: Why did...why was it called the "Bamboo Bomber"?

Lehman: Just kidding then. Ya know, it was it wasn't a bomber at all, but it had twin engines and twin engines, usually, meant the bomber except for the P-38 Lightning Lightning [Lockheed P-38 Lightning] which had two engines. [Flipping through photos]. Well oh, one of the more challenging things we had to do was "fly" quotes a Link Trainer. A Link Trainer, we actually weren't flying. It was an enclosed cubicle that was used for instrument training and they closed the lid that it was completely dark in there except for the instrument lights and you had to make maneuvers by using the controls and if you were you, had a solid tone heading toward your destination. It was the city. As long as you flew straight in that direction and, of course, you couldn't see anything out of the cubicle at all. You would hear a solid turn. If you got too far on the right, you would hear a "dit dot". If you got too far on the left you'd hear a "dot dip" and it sounds like that would be easy but what you would, typically, do is over correct. You know, you'd try to pull it down to where you got the solid tone and all of a sudden you are on the other side so I can actually remember sweating bullets in there. It was so realistic, and part of the sweating bullets was we knew if we failed we'd be washed out meaning kicked out of the Air Corps. So that was part of our training there.

Cohen: It's interesting that there was such an effective simulator before computers.

Lehman: That's right, that's right that was...yeah they probably use strictly computers, today. Well here's a picture of the plane from the front that we were flying an advanced training and here the picture of all the graduates. That's...so graduating here from advanced training, we got our wings. We were no longer air cadets. We became second lieutenants. We were now flight trained.

Cohen: So was it very rigorous? Were there people who could not succeed and graduate?

Lehman: Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. In fact, yeah in fact, I had one experience there that came very close to washing another student and I, out. We were about eighty miles south of El Paso. So one night we were sent on a what they called a, "cross-country flight". Individually, nobody no other plane with us. We were told the direction, what direction to go in, we were told what the wind would be, so we knew how to correct, hopefully, and we were told to fly north actually, was north northwest to El Paso, about eighty miles. Then turn right, fly directly east to another town which was in a line of towns and then back making a triangle to the Air base. Well as it turned out, we had no trouble finding El Paso. That's a big size city, but as we turned east there was a string of towns and we weren't sure which one was supposed to be our turning point and as it turned out we turned too early and as we flew back, all of a sudden, there was nothing. Not a single -- and by the way it was nighttime, but it was not cloudy. So fortunately, the moon was out, and we did not see a light on the ground anywhere. I believe it was

uninhabited mountainous territory and we finally, and we finally said to each other well we'll just have to fly and the first light we see will bail out. Of course, that would have been the end of our Air Corps [career] and all of a sudden, we saw the Rio Grande that was apparent in the moonlight and we knew we shouldn't cross the Rio Grande so we turned a little bit and all of a sudden way in the distance we saw a light. We said, "That's it we're gonna fly there, we're gonna bail out", and as we approached it the light got bigger and it got bigger and it got bigger and it was our air base!

Cohen: Oh my goodness. How lucky!

Lehman: [Lehman laughs]. So, so we were all right, but we came...ya know, the funny thing is that experience haunts me today. There are some nights when I can't sleep and I think about that how close we came. If we bailed out in those mountains, I'm not sure we could have survived because as I said there were no lights anywhere. I don't, I'm not even sure we knew which direction we should go in but at the time we were trained to be hard, non-caring, ya know the term of the Air Force song, "Here we go into the wild blue yonder" [Air Force Song], has the phrase, "to live in fame or lose die in flame" [lyrics clarified, later by Lehman]. I would say to, "Live in fame or die in flame" and at the time that didn't bother us at all but as I think back, that was a little frightening too [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]. Well that's interesting because I read a memoir of somebody who is a pilot on a B-17. I'll look up the name in a second and it short of sounded as if they were trying to cultivate a certain spirit of audacity.

Lehman: That's exactly right. Exactly right, exactly right and many of the training technique, now I'm going clear back to pre-flight. I still remember one where we were supposed to manipulate a long needle-like projection inside of a metal circle that was very small. Much smaller than this [gestures at something in the room] and we were supposed to keep this instrument in the center. If it touched either side it made a noise and that was our signal to get it back to the center and it was very tight and impossible, ya know. Again and again, I would hit the side and the buzzer would go off and I'd get it back for about a second and then the buzzer goes and I finally just, ya know you can't nobody tells you why you're doing this, ya know. No explanation, at all and I'm wondering, "Why are they having us, what's this got to do with flying"? And I finally decided I don't know if I'm right or not I'm just speculating - they were testing our patience to make you know would we not give up and say, "I can't do this." That's the closest I can come to any thought which may or may not be true.

Cohen: So here you are, you're at the advanced training at Marfa...

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: [inaudible] and when did you graduate? Does that mark the end of you—

Lehman: No

Cohen: Training?

Lehman: Well, the end of the flight training yes but I was then sent, now, all this time I had not been close to a B-17, ya know. This was an advanced training in a [Cessna] twin-engine plane, a rather small one. So some guys were sent to B-17 flight training to become a first pilot I was sent to where the first pilots went after their training to what they called transition training at Rapid City, South Dakota, and there I became a co-pilot without any B-17 training, I sort of learned on the job as a co-pilot how to fly that plane and we had two months of training there with our full crew, which I've never met before we got to Rapid City and you know, we had our full crew. There were nine of us altogether; it had been ten, originally. There was a gun a 50-50 caliber machine gun a set of guns on either side of the fuselage of the plane. So they had two waist gunners they call 'em, but they finally decided we're gonna be flying close formation and you can't shoot on the side with the other planes in your formation. So to lighten the load that allow for a little heavier bomb load they cut, they cut it, so that's how we got from ten to nine by the time I got there.

Cohen: So just to clarify, the time that you were in South Dakota you sort of had to figure out yourself how to fly a B-17?

Lehman: Well, the guy that was the first pilot in essence taught me, yeah, yeah. Now there were instructors there if I needed help, but he was able to teach me what I needed to know and, of course, I knew how to fly a plane so that part what's not unfamiliar.

Cohen: So it wasn't such a leap to go like to a four engine plane?

Lehman: Just two more engines and, and two more sets of controls and so forth, yeah. It wasn't that big a transition and our gunners, of course, we had our – gunnery practice. They would shoot their guns in an isolated area there and we would make little missions getting used to each other- operating the plane. Trying to get used to circumstances that we would face in combat.

Cohen: So did you stay with this crew or...?

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: Oh, oh.

Lehman: I stayed with the crew until I became a first pilot and then I had only a mission or two left to make my thirty-five. Thirty-five was the requirement when I got there. I'll get back to that...So when I became a first pilot I said, "Look I've flown all, all this time with this crew. I hate to leave them. Can I stay and fly as the copilot even though I was qualified as first [lieutenant]?" and they said, "Okay." So every, the only mission I flew as first pilot was the very last mission that I left my crew and flew as first pilot. I mentioned the thirty-five missions. Many people have heard it was twenty-five required and that was true for the early years of the B-17 flying, and believe me I'd a lot rather flown the thirty-five when I flew then the twenty-five when they flew because they did not have the fighter support beyond or beyond a certain limit, and they were subject to being massacred by the German air force.

Cohen: Do you want to talk a bit more about the role of the fighter support when you were flying in formation?

Lehman: Yes and I was thinking of showing you this wall map. Can we stop and go in there or, or is that or should we do that later?

Cohen: Could we do that later?

Lehman: Sure that'll be fine, but at the beginning of the war, the Germans had much better equipment than we did, or the English did, or the French as far as I know. They had better tanks, they had better planes. One of their best fighter planes was called the me-109 [Messerschmitt Bf 109] which I heard described as an engineering marvel in that it was so small so compact and so lethal and so air worthy and until the British Spitfire [Supermarine Spitfire] which I'm sure you've heard of came along and also got what they called a Merlin engine special engine that plane was the equivalent of the of the German me-109, but that was pretty well along in the war for the English. It was it was coming into play when we were there, but that Spitfire and our planes were the twin-engine twin fuselage Lightning P-38 was its official designation which was a good plane but limited range. The P-47, which was a rather fat single fuselage plane, good plane but limited range. In fact at the beginning of the war we were pretty much flying, I say we, those who were flying P-40s, which was an outdated plane that Chennault [Claire Lee Chennault] was using in China. I'm not sure if you ever heard of the Flying Tigers but before we got involved in the world war, at all, there was a general by the name of Chennault, retired general who developed his own force to help China, an, Air Force and they were flying what was called a P-40s and he was called a War Hawk or something like that. P-40 anyway but that was an outdated plane to try to deal with their Germans and so we were, we the United States, was really in process of trying to learn. Finally, our savior

came along the P-51 Mustang [North American P-51 Mustang] and that plane was accessible to wing tanks. They could have wing tanks carrying extra fuel and that would get them able to accompany us almost all the way to the target and...

Cohen: Even if the target was in Germany?

Lehman: That's right that's right, that's right. So that's right so that was a big a big move and that helped a lot and when that came along since we shall we still had every bit as much flak concern maybe even more because the Germans were getting better and better at it but relatively little fighter attacks on the part of the Germans. They attacked my group only once, and even then they backed off because we were in close formation which they did what they loved was to get a lone B-17. They loved that, that was duck soup. So if anyone was straggling, that's what the German fighters would go for and they saw a looser formation alongside of us so they moved over to them, fortunately, and then of course I saw air battles in front of us that looked like the whole sky was lightening up and I thought they were gonna attack us but they never did. So anyway to make the story short since we had an easier, somewhat easier time of it they increased the required number of missions from twenty-five to thirty-five.

Cohen: Wow, it's all interesting and we'll go back to some of what you discussed soon.

Lehman: Okay.

Cohen: So just jumping back, a bit chronologically, did you and your crew were you, did you fly a plane over to England or you sent by ship? How did it work?

Lehman: We...when we finished our transition training and Rapid City, South Dakota, we were sent to Kearney, Nebraska to pick up a brand-new B-17 which we naively, thought was gonna be our ship and we kidded ourselves about polishing the propeller and all that stuff. We flew to Gander, Newfoundland [Canada] and being much closer to Eur[ope]--. No flying to Europe was not that easy a deal in those days. It wasn't that common and when we got Gander, we were to fly that plane over the Atlantic but the weather was bad and we were stalled there about four days for the weather was good enough so they there let us go. So we flew that B-17 over the Atlantic and of course that was kind of an interesting breath-holding time because it was the first time, we were really at the mercy of our navigator. Did he really know what he was doing, you know?

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: And we landed in Ireland. It must have been northern. I'm sure was Northern Ireland cause southern Ireland I don't think was on the British side. They were relatively neutral but we landed there and the airport of a city and again we had

a day or two waiting, ironically, not for a plane but for a ferry boat to take us from Ireland to England but so the first pilot and I went and tried to help a farmer pitch hay for a while and it was beautiful everything was the greenest I've ever seen it and I made the mistake asking an Irish farmer, "Is England like this"? And he said, I thought rather spitefully, "I've never been to England", as though I ought to know better than ask a question like that, you know.

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: But, anyway, the irony was that having thought this was our plane, when we landed in Ireland we had hardly unfastened our seat belts before an inspector from the ground was in that plane making sure we didn't take anything out, like the field glasses for example, and that was the last we saw that plane and we finally got to the 379th, we were flying pretty well used airplanes. Not always the same one, you know. We didn't even get to name our plane. I don't remember if it had a name or not but anyway that was the plane story.

Cohen: So when you were in England, you were in-you were at the base of Kimbolton [RAF Kimbolton]

Lehman: Yes, well when we first got there we got to a staging field and were you know they had to decide who was going to what airfield but that was only a couple days and then we were sent to the field in Kimbolton. I'm delighted you found that. [air photo of Kimbolton] Is that mean that that field is still there or was that a photograph?

Cohen: I think might been an air photograph taken at the time.

Lehman: I think maybe so 'cause Kimbolton [was] a very small town and I would doubt that they can afford an airfield, so to speak, so I have a hunch that was one created just for World War II, but I never knew. So I but I'm delighted to have it.

Cohen: Oh thank, thank you. Thank you. So you said that when you were the crew were in Kimbolton you were flying a variety of craft, aircraft.

Lehman: Oh, they're all B-17s.

Cohen: They're all B-17s--

Lehman: Yeah, but different planes.

Cohen: But-- different types, different models. So was there any more training or practice flights once you were at the Kimbolton airfield or were you right away being sent on missions?

Lehman: We had some advice training, ya know if sure shot down, do this don't do that. One of the issues we had to decide was we had the right to have a 45-millimeter pistol with us. Do you want that or not? The advantage was if you're shot down, of course, you can use that against any farmer attacking you with a pitchfork, but on the other hand the negative part was if the German army apprehended you, they had an excuse to kill ya, if you were armed. If you weren't armed they, generally, were reluctant to kill you. They take your prisoner and by the way you hope you would be apprehended by the German army not the farmer because the farmer hated you - he didn't want those bombs dropping or anywhere near him. So the danger would be greater from civilians than the German army, but we were taught things like that, ya know. By taught -- they gave us the choice [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: So what did you chose regarding the gun?

Lehman: I choose not, not to and most of the guys I was with choose that, too, but I don't know how the general population of flyers chose but we did learn-we had lectures of subjects like that, but we didn't do much flight training, per se. Now occasionally we had a- our crew or part of it would have to take a plane up because it had brand new engines and they had to be broken in and the only way to do that was to fly the darn thing for, you know, two or three hours which was about the most boring thing you could do, ya know. Where do you go? Why do you just fly around? Yeah, and one night we did it at night and experienced one of the most frightening things we'd run into. It was very foggy and all of a sudden we couldn't see the ground. We couldn't find our airfield and we could call "Mayday", which was a, "help us" remark, on the phone and supposedly manned throughout England but we never got an answer but finally, now I was on one phone the first pilot was on another, he may have got some clue, but all of a sudden in the fog there appeared an airfield and my god, it was ours. So again I'm lucky [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs], the second time you're lucky.

Lehman: Yeah, right. I'm an agnostic but there's times like that you begin to wonder, [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [Laughs]. Well, one thing I was wondering too, is that it seems to me that you would have arrived in England in July 1944 and I was wondering, what was the morale like of the other servicemen? Were they excited about the success of the invasion at D-Day [Normandy Invasion]? Were they worried at the battles of Normandy or Belgium etc.?

Lehman: By the way we got there in August.

Cohen: Oh, August okay.

Lehman: Late August.

Cohen: Late August okay, okay.

Lehman: Yeah. You know I don't know. We didn't associate much with the guys that had been there. You know we were a new set of crews. We were put in a barracks with guys like us, so we didn't get a lot of to do with experienced fires there, but I think mostly the focus was survival. People ask me at times how did I feel about bombing and killing people and I have to confess part of it was our hard training we talked about earlier. Brutal, ya know, but part of it was our thoughts are trying to survive and five miles up, I never saw our bombs land. I'm not sure any of our crew did -- five miles high. If you did see an explosion down below from that high, you'd never know whether you from your ship or another ship. I'd like to think we had empathy for the people but, but I have to confess our thoughts were survival. We just want to live, [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: Well, I did wonder about that 'cause I found an interesting...well difficult statistic. I was reading that eighty out of 151 B-17 were shot down a bit earlier from May '43 to '44 and then about sixty-one out of 141 were shot down from April '44 until April '45. So in other words forty-three percent of the planes were lost to enemy fighters and to anti-aircraft guns and I wondered if people were aware that the odds were not amazing you know when you're... like when you were when you were flying, were people aware that the risk was high?

Lehman: Yeah, oh yeah. [Lehman laughs]

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: Oh yeah, yeah, very much so. Oh one other thing, we were never given a tar-. We had a brief a long briefing before each flight. This would be about four o'clock in the morning and four a.m. and we were always targeted with a military target. I mean never civilian and now, of course, we didn't always hit it. That was the problem but that was the other element in this. As far as we knew, we were not aiming for people, we're aiming for, now admittedly munition plants had people in them, but that was unavoidable.

Cohen: Right, but it was more military things?

Lehman: Yeah, we were going for oil refineries or munition plants, ball bearing plants, railroad yards. Always a military target, yeah.

Cohen: Could you talk about like a typical timeline of a mission? Like what time were you woken up? You know, when did you eat breakfast, etc.

Lehman: We were awakened around 3:30 in the morning, something like that or three o'clock. We got up, got dressed, toiletry and so forth. I think first we went to the mess hall and got a breakfast of sorts and then we went to briefing and then from briefing we went to the flight line and there was time forty-five minutes or so, to inspect the plane and look it over make sure we thought it was air worthy as far as we could tell but my first pilot all I got so we had complete trust in the ground crew to have the plane in good shape and the rest of our crew were checking guns out and stuff but on the flight line the maintenance crew had cots in a tent so we went in and got a little extra sleep on their cot. We didn't necessarily sleep but we lay down and rested awhile and took a quick look at the plane, yeah and then the time came to fly and we'd line up, and in the lineup to take off and at the other end there would be a light and when that flash green if you were the first one in line, off you go.

Cohen: Did the position of the planes that you were in vary over the thirty-five missions?

Lehman: Oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah and we were told which position was ours and we flew in squadrons, generally, twelve ships in a squadron three...three planes constituted --I think we called it a flight --three planes. So there'd be three planes, and this is the lead plane then there's three above and a little behind them and then another three behind them and a fourth three down here those were the twelve ships the squadron.

Cohen: So here I'm a little puzzled because I was reading about the thirty-six plane squadrons but, but you're but you're saying you're a part of the twelfth plane squadron?

Lehman: Thirty-six, it's a group. That's three squadrons.

Cohen: Okay.

Lehman: So right. So the three squadrons that are aligned that way, yeah and each base would typically, send out a group. We were the 379th Bomb Group and we would contribute a group to every attack, every mission attack that we were assigned to participate into. There wouldn't necessarily be the same planes each morning. When you heard that guy come in the barrack, if you heard him at 3:30, you were generally hoping it wouldn't be you and I -- I still remember...Am I going in too much detail?

Cohen: No, it's very good.

Lehman: I still remember when my first pilot was a real rouser. He loved to drink, and he loved ladies and one time the guy came in to wake up the crews that were scheduled to fly and two minutes later my first pilot comes in. He'd been out all night and, of course, he'd been drinking heavily and my god we were assigned of the flight. So after you take off, I told you about the green light, you take off you have to go up often through fog. You don't see any other planes, you hope, because if you do you're in trouble in the fog. Finally, when you get up there you have to find your group your squadron and, and that's at about 8,000 feet altitude and then finally you assemble which takes a while with twelve ships you know thirty-six all together and then you start over. So it's a lengthy process and as you fly with your group. There are three, I can't remember what we call them, back up ships. Three back up planes that fly behind the group and they're there, in case and whatever one of the ships aborts. Engine trouble or whatever and then one of those three escort ships is the sign that...no not a sign should take his place. So we were assigned one of the escort jobs on this mission and my first pilot said, "I'm feeling awful". He said I you, "I've got to go down and get the relief can" and it was underneath us. He said, "If there's an opening, don't take it". Well I didn't like that idea at all because we'd gone through this long procedure getting up early, getting the breakfast, getting the brief, and this didn't sound like too bad a mission as missions go. So I wasn't sure I was gonna to do that. Sure enough one ship backed out and I was among the closest and I raced that I got the open spot. [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: and I-I I thought he might shoot me when he got back up to his seat, but he took it well. I think maybe his experience with the can helped him and we went through the flight, so there you go.

Cohen: So where were the fighter escorts in relation to the group?

Lehman: Well, of course they were much faster than we were. They had trouble flying at our speed. We were flying about a170 miles an hour and they could fly at that speed, but it was uncomfortable and I'm not sure their ships were very maneuverable at that speed. So they would disappear for a while fly around and then they would come back and fly alongside and maybe, wave. We didn't see a lot of them because they were guarding several groups, ya know and so frequently ... oh and by the way they tried to remain as high as they could because from fighter situations, the higher you are -- if you're fighting another fighter plane the higher you are the better so they wanted-when they left us temporarily, they would go for altitude usually. We didn't see a lot of them, but we knew they were there.

Cohen: Was there ever a situation in a plane that fell out of the formation?

Lehman: What the what?

Cohen: Oh, were you ever in a plane that could no longer maintain the formation? What was that--

Lehman: Oh yeah, I think it was our first mission, one of our engines was shut out and when that happens you have to feather that engine. You know what that means? Well, it means the propeller is flat, ya know, as it turns. You have to turn it so there's less wind resistance. So we did that with the one engine and then the first pilot, now here's where his experience was a lot better than mine, maybe, because he decided we'd be better off lagging our formation a bit in order not to put too much stress on the remaining three engines. So we did lapse quite a ways behind, we might have been half a mile behind, but later he got absolutely [criticized severely] by the commander, "Don't ever leave the formation", and that's when we had lesson number one on the need to stick together because as I say that the Jerries [German soldiers] as we called them we're just smacking their lips at the thought of the lone B-17.

Cohen: [laughs]. Do you remember the target of the first mission, like or where you went?

Lehman: Yes.

Cohen: I read in the article that you remembered flying over Paris that would have been recently liberated. That you mentioned--

Lehman: Oh no that I...I don't know what happened to these places. There's, there's the list of our missions.

Cohen: Okay so I see the first one – it says-- northern France.

Lehman: Yeah, I'm not even sure what target we had there. In fact, I don't remember what target we had and any of those places, except for Merseburg [Germany] and Cologne [Germany].

Cohen: What was-what were the targets in Merseburg and Cologne?

Lehman: Oil refinery in Merseburg and if I remember right, ya know, it was a munitions plant in Cologne and we went to each one about five times, so we must never have hit it well. Merseburg was the worst. Just terrible, that's where another old Oak Parker, I knew of him in high school although I didn't know him personally was killed. His plane went down as did a bunch of others at Merseburg because we had a fly in, I don't know if I already said that...No, I think it's in that courier

article. Instead of flying it around 26- 27,000 feet, there was cloud cover up there and they decided to fly in at 19,000 feet and we just got the heck shot out of us. So that was a baddie.

Cohen: Was your plane hit too?

Lehman: Yeah, I think that's where we had the 300 flak holes.

Cohen: Oh, wow.

Lehman: But none of the crew was hit for on that mission. Our tail gunner was hit on another mission.

Cohen: Which mission was he hit on?

Lehman: You know, I have a record of it somewhere but I I could look it up, but it would take me quite a while to find it.

Cohen: Yeah, no, um. Just give me a moment please. It doesn't seem like it, but I'll ask you, anyhow. Were any of your missions in support of the ground forces, such as at the Battle of the Bulge?

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: Or the land assault over the Rhine valley, yeah?

Lehman: The answer for our crew is no. We came close because when the Battle of the Bulge came that was in December of... '45? '44. December of 44. I should go back a step. Our planes were heavy bombers. They were not designed for ground-level activity. They were too bulky too, too big and the bombs were too big for direct warfare like that. So normally, we had nothing to do with ground support, per se, but when the Bulge came it was decided at the very least we could bomb where we knew the German lines were and not our own then we couldn't do much harm other than to the Germans. So they decided to send some of our crews over, but the weather was so bad, so bad that we couldn't do it. Now there's even speculation whether the German navigational instruments knew that. Whether they timed the Battle of the Bulge for that but that was just speculation. I'll never know but it was terrible. We couldn't get off the ground. Finally, they decided that our ships should take sleeping equipment. They'd take off, do whatever they could do, and land in France. Not try to get back to England because of the bad weather but we were not at -- our plane was not asked to take part in that. That was the closest we ever came to ground support.

Cohen: Do you want to talk a bit more about the flak? Like you said this really exemplified your service. Was it less intense as the end of the war was becoming closer, like...?

Lehman: I don't think it was. I don't think it was. They, they may have tailed off a little bit because they might have been running short of supplies because we kept bombing their facilities, but it was never easy. Ya know, we we were never not worried about flak.

Cohen: The other think a colleague of mine mentioned the same German plane that you mentioned the, I think the Me-262 [Messerschmitt Me 262] ...

Lehman: Yeah, that one I believe that was a jet.

Cohen: A jet. Excuse me, a jet.

Lehman: Yeah, that came in toward the end of the war when there were some of those around. Thank goodness they were developed relatively late in the war when we had enough air control to probably prevent the manufacturer of a lot more of them. I never saw one that I'm aware of, you know, but you see a plane in the distance you're not sure what kind it is but...for the most part we didn't worry much about the jets because there weren't that many around.

Cohen: Hmm, more-more so the flak from the...

Lehman: That's right.

Cohen: Artillery.

Lehman: While the flak or the Me-109 [Messerschmitt Bf 109], which was still around.

Cohen: Oh-oh, the Me-109 [Messerschmitt Bf 109] was still –still around.

Lehman: And they had another plane. Might have been a Focke-Wulf 190 or something like that. That was pretty good...fighter plane too.

Cohen: So did any, did you, see with your own eyes, if any of the German fighter planes that infiltrate your either your squadron or the group? Like were you, did you see anything like that?

Lehman: I saw it for the group ahead of us. I didn't see it for our group but bear in mind as pilots we're looking ahead and looking at our formation and we didn't get to see much other than that because flying and formation required constant attention. So one of us would be doing that, we pretty much take turns. The other could

look around a little but you can't see a lot to the side or up or down or back from the pilots headquarter, mostly forward. So no we I didn't really witness that, knowingly.

Cohen: And were there other difficulties, such as certain landings? I mean other than the two that you mentioned where it was dark, and it was a challenged to find the airfield again. So as you read about, I don't know, for different reasons difficulty landing the plane, like was that your experience?

Lehman: You mean mechanical difficulty or...

Cohen: Or if the plane was hit and had one engine left, that type of situation.

Lehman: No, we were lucky in that score. We landed once with the three engines but no particular problem you have to exert more effort because the plane becomes a little unbalanced, but it wasn't that challenging.

Cohen: Okay, were there always these Triangle K's [planes of the 379th Bomb Group flew with this image]

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: to identify... [i.e. the group]

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah, yeah

Lehman: That was our group identified, yeah.

Cohen: And I think you said that you were flying...you and the crew were flying different planes, so I don't know so did you ever come across planes that had a mascot or you know if somebody see pictures with planes with paintings on them.

Lehman: We did to some extent, but I don't have any memory of them.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah I think right...So one thing I wonder about have far was Kimbolton from London and what would you do if you had some time off?

Lehman: I'll show you about where it is in relation little London when we look at this wall map. I think it was about thirty-five miles, maybe thirty. North northwest of London. What would we do? We'd get two-day leaves and the first pilot, and I will usually go somewhere together. Then we tried to see different towns. We went to Manchester, once. We went to... in fact we went to a zoo. I-I, ya know

John Maroney [John Mahoney] you remember him, Mahoney; Mahoney the actor? You don't remember? You ever watch **Frazier** on TV?

Cohen: Oh yeah, oh yeah

Lehman: Mahoney was the father. He lived two blocks south of here, he did now. I hope -- but he was born and raised in Manchester. I was always hoping, I'd run into him around Oak Park and ask him if there was a zoo there because I remember going to the zoo and I don't remember for sure which town. And one time we went clear up to Aberdeen, Scotland hoping we can get some scotch there and I went in a scotch sales store, but it was strictly rationed. They wouldn't sell it to me so but Aberdeen, Aberdeen is near the north of Scotland. So we would be taking a train to these places. So that's, that's pretty much what we did.

Cohen: Was it exciting for you? Ya know, being a...

Lehman: Yeah, it was, it was. I'm a bit of a history buff and, you know, I enjoy going to towns that I'd read about. One that was prominent and rotten -- the story of Robin Hood. I can't remember the name of it. We went there but there was no evidence of Robin Hood so [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: That was a bummer, [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]. You know, you had written in the questionnaire that sometimes you also enjoyed reading literature--

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: --when you had spare time. so what type of books or newspapers did you like to read?

Lehman: Well, I'm an investment guy. By that I mean investments in stocks, primarily, are not only my source of income but they're my hobby and I do what's not good investment. I hold dribs and drabs of about fifty stocks. That's far too many from an investment standpoint. Even if I knew what to look for, I couldn't handle that many but to me there's something fun about being part of this company Triple M in...Minnesota or AT&T; or Verizon. I like, I have the feeling I'm a part of it if I own a couple shares of their stock. So I spend quite a bit of time doing that. I get investment advice from **Value Line**. I don't know if you ever heard of **Value Line**...and they tell you their opinion on all kinds of stocks. So I spent a lot of time doing that. Then I'm a history buff, so I take the **Smithsonian Magazine**.

Although I may have to stop that. The print is too small for my eyesight and I read **Time Magazine** and I read **National Geographic** or at least skim those.

Cohen: What did you read when you were in the army?

Lehman: Oh.

Cohen: I didn't ask you...

Lehman: I read classical books like... what it Tol--, **War and Peace**.

Cohen: Yeah.

Lehman: Books, books like that. Tolstoy and...a number of classical writers I, that were well known. Somewhere along the line, I read **All Quiet on the Western Front**. Are you familiar with that story?

Cohen: I haven't read it but I'm, ya know, familiar with it, like yeah.

Lehman: Well the thing, ya know, 'cause it's about a German soldier.

Cohen: WWI.

Lehman: WWI, and ironically, and I still remember parts of it. It was so impressive to me and, of course, this is about the [Imperial] Germany Army but believe it or not, as you go through the story with him, with this soldier and the barracks and his treatment and what he encounters, you develop empathy with him. You're rooting for him even though he's a German soldier and, but his guys, his buddies are all dying off, ya know, but [inaudible] mostly ailments but, of course, some battle scenes too but this guy's dying off, that guy's dying off, and as you read through it, you get towards the end, he's still talking in the first person. So you say, "Well, at least he lives". You get to the very last paragraph and it suddenly switches to the third paragraph and it said he was killed by a German sniper on the day the newspapers said, "All Quiet on the Western Front".

Cohen: Why, what a powerful ending.

Lehman: Yeah, I actually choke up even as I tell the story. So anyway, I still remember that one and...other authors that were well-known at the time. I like that stuff. Now, I read mysteries [Lehman laughs]

Cohen: Well, I'm impressed that still [inaudible]

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: It doesn't sound easy, ya know, being in an airbase and in between missions to read classical [inaudible] works.

Lehman: That's right, that's right. Well, of course, in England, ya know, we didn't have access to the m-, much in the way of books, but what little we did I looked for what I described.

Cohen: Did you receive the **Stars and Stripes**?

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: Yeah.

Lehman: Yeah, we did. I don't remember much about it, but we did.

Cohen: Were you impressed, or did you notice any of the cartoons?

Lehman: Oh yeah! Yeah

Cohen: So, what-

Lehman: I can't, Bill Mauldin, I think, was one and there was another guy. Yeah they were funny, they were good.

Cohen: They were good. Like what, well here I'm gonna back it up, to be so coy about it, the Mauldin family has donated some cartoons to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library...

Lehman: Oh?

Cohen: And we're planning an exhibit and then a book and so on and a documentary, but I guess I was wondering if you remembered a particular cartoon or why you liked them, ya know?

Lehman: Well, I liked them because they were deriding the, many of the negative aspects of being in the military service, ya know, and they depicted cartoons deriding that which was funny. Of course, the standard, one of the standard sayings was, "Hurry up and wait", which is the story, ya know. You gotta be here on time and so you get there on time and you're in a line and you wait a half an hour before anything happens. But they were not a big-big influence, not a big part of my military life, but they were fun.

Cohen: Fun, yeah.

Lehman: Yeah.

Cohen: So how did you hear about V-E day [Victory in Europe Day], ya know, the surrender on May 8th, 1945?

Lehman: I was in, this time I had come back from overseas service. They didn't know what to do with me, back to on the way to Santa Ana, which was then a rest and rehabilitation center. That's where I originally mentioned we, we had our pre-flight training and we were fed royally, there - that was fun, but they didn't know what to do with us. Finally, they transferred me to the Air Transport Command. Then, sent me...to Florida, Homestead, Florida. Learn how to be a copilot on a four-engine transport plane. So I spent a month or so, six weeks, I think, there and then sent me back to place called Fairfield-Suisun, California in between Sacramento and San Francisco and we idled there for a while, but we didn't know this 'cause we were never told but what we're being trained for was in a preparation for the atomic bomb, which we didn't know existed: to carry our troops from Okinawa and Guam to Japan. We were training to transport them. I never had to go. I say, "I never had to" and in a way I wish I had. It would have been interesting, but they, they just didn't call me when it came to calling up a group and the war had...ended shortly after that. So that's why I wasn't called. So it was...So, I was, yeah, on Fairfield-Suisun airbase when I heard about it.

Cohen: Okay, so you had been sent back state side while the war was still going on....

Lehman: That's right.

Cohen: With other training with the thought of going to the Pacific.

Lehman: That's right.

Cohen: Oh, okay. Um, one thing that I remember from the article, that you sent when you were visiting back at home was, I don't know how to put it well. Were you allowed to have a trip back home before returning to England on your missions?

Lehman: Before returning to England?

Cohen: Okay, like I noticed...

Lehman: No.

Cohen: No.

Lehman: Once I was over in England with the 8th [US] Air Force, I could not leave except for two-day leaves but when I had completed my thirty-five missions, I was given the opportunity to fly fighters over to Europe...but I, for once I was given a chance to say, "No" and I did. I wanted to go home. I'd seen enough of that.

Cohen: [laughs], yeah

Lehman: So-so, I did go back and as I said finally end up in the ATC [Air Traffic Control].

Cohen: Sir, just before we go on, are, I want to make sure you're not missing your lunch, are you? Like are you...I'm a little concerned about the time.

Lehman: Yeah, I'm...I don't have any lunch time. In fact, I don't always eat it so, it's not a big deal with me, but I do tire a bit after a while. Do have much more to go?

Cohen: Yeah, yeah, let's maybe let's wrap it up. Ya know, there's always a lot of questions but let's just...

Lehman: Okay.

Cohen: Try to focus, what it seems to be the most important or you tell me what you think is most important. One thing I was just curious about is when you became a pilot from being a co-pilot.

Lehman: Say, what was the first part of that question?

Cohen: At one point, you became a pilot. You told me the majority of the missions you flown as a co-pilot, so how was determination made...

Lehman: Well, I have to thank my first pilot for that. It was, I think someone unusual, normally, that didn't happen. The co-pilot would complete missions as a co-pilot and as a second lieutenant, but my pilot thought I was particularly good and he, one time on a drinking bout -bout with a commander, he told him what a great pilot he thought I was and that I should be a first pilot. So the commander said, this wasn't the top commander, but his interim commander. He said, "Well, all right, I'll go up with him and see-see what I think," which he and did and he was impressed enough to think, ya I I'm gonna be a first, first pilot.

Cohen: Wow.

Lehman: So that was it. I didn't have any particular training for it, other than learning what I did.

Cohen: And do you want to talk a little bit about your life after you were discharged, like what you did or, ya know, how you set up your life?

Lehman: I floundered around for a while not really knowing what to do. Finally, I worked for a while at a place called **General Electric Supply**. Met my wife there, which was about the only good thing I got out of it, but I was such a bum they fired me [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: For, for not, by this time I learned not to care about civilian things. I had to re-learn to care, which I did. Anyway, I ended up with the gas company. Had a career there. Finally, became a vice president and...

Cohen: H-Had you gone back to school?

Lehman: Yeah, oh, I'm sorry. Yes, when I first got out, yes, I did return to Michigan [University], but this time I got a degree, as I mentioned, in business, yeah.

Cohen: Yeah.

Lehman: And oh, and I also, after I started working for the gas company, I went to night school and got a master's degree at business at the U of C [University of Chicago] in, who had of...student offices in the Loop.

Cohen: That's good. So one thing I noticed was that there seemed to be, like a number of museums that commemorate the 379th Bomb Group. Have you been to any or what do you think of their efforts at commemoration?

Lehman: I been inactive on that score. I never kept track of my crew and I wish I had. Other than a couple of instances, one of which I'll tell you if there's time, but I do, I am a contributing member, but I don't do anything about it, to what is called the Commemorative Air Force. Their name used to be the Confederate Air Force, which of course a joke, but this was a bunch of guys who flew in WWII who realized the government is systematically destroying all of those warship-war planes and that bothered them. So, they developed this, what they called the Confederate Air Force. This was in Texas, in Brownsville, Texas and they acquired, some of them had quite a bit of money, so they acquired some of these old ships, of course, they were cheap. The government was trying to get rid of them and they still exist today, but I think political pressure forced them to change the name from Confederate Air Force to Commemorative Air Force [Lehman laughs].

Cohen: [laughs]

Lehman: I went, I went down there once to see their planes and their operation and they welcome visitors and my wife was with me and we walked into to office and started talking and while I talked, one of the pilots, they were still flying these plane [drinking something] came by and I stopped him and I said, ya know, do you except any contributions and I told him. Ya know, he asked why I was interested. I told him my military background and he said, "Sir", he said, "We're going to make you a colonel. We're all colonels here". The ground crews were colonels too. So, they put-, and I was thinking I'll, ya know, maybe I'll give 'em fifty dollars or something like that. So, they took me into this office, he said, "We're gonna have you fill out this memorandum". So I did an application and when the clerk got all through she said, "That'll be 200 dollars" and I about flipped at that time, ya know. So, anyway that, I'm still theoretically a member but I don't attend any meetings. Also, there's a...there is a-- American, I probably don't have the name right, but American Air Force Academy or Museum [American Air Museum] in England. Have you heard of it?

Cohen: Yes, yes, I forget the exact name, but I noticed the one.

Lehman: Yeah, so I send them a little money, too, ya know, but I don't do anything.

Cohen: Had you visited the museum in England?

Lehman: No, it didn't, I don't think it existed while I was there. My wife and went back several times and I never heard of it then. If I had I would have visited, yeah.

Cohen: Do you feel like being in the military contributed, either directly or indirectly, to your life as a civilian?

Lehman: Yes, I do, but pretty indirectly. Ya know, it was a life experience and in a way a valuable one, but I-I'd be hard put to say exactly why...I just, I just feel I've seen a part of life that would otherwise be unfamiliar to me that was important and gripping.

Cohen: Well, do you have any other things that you'd like to discuss before we close?

Lehman: When I finished in the Air Force, I made the mistake of not having any continuing contact with my crew members. Only once or twice did I talk to one or two of them over the phone, but about eight years ago, many years after the experience, my wife had a call from a woman who said she was the wife of the guy that had been my first pilot and wondered if I was Ruel Lehman that he flew with, and we later found out he got my name and phone number because I had applied once for insurance with the U-, I can't remember but it's the one st-, the insurance company that started with the military. USAAF [USAA, United Services

Automobile Association??] or something like that and sure enough I had made an inquiry once. So that how, in their computer, they had the record. Anyway, I got in contact with him, as a result we talked a little bit and he had stayed in the Army Air Corp, which became the Air Force. [He] worked, flew in Korea, in the Korean War. [He] had become a Lieutenant Colonel, but he wanted to talk to me and as we talked a little bit, I realized he's dying. He's not, he didn't say so, but certain things he said he made it clear that he wasn't gonna be on this earth, very long and I'll never forget that. We chatted a while and reminisced about our experiences and our missions and sure enough, two months later, I did get a note from his son that he died, but that really got to me. That here he is dying after all these years, what is he thinking of? He's thinking of our military experience together, flying for the 8th Air Force.

Cohen: So, I'd just like to say, on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, thank you for your interview and thank you for your service.

Leman: Very good, glad to be a part of it.