

Walter Sabo

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START [0:00]

CLARKE: Will you please spell your name?

SABO: S-A-B-O, Sabo, Walter, W-A-L-T-E-R, and the 'A' stands for Anthony.

CLARKE: Walter welcome, what was your rank when you left the military?

SABO: I was a staff sergeant.

CLARKE: And what did you go in as?

SABO: Well I went in as a private, and what we did, we went through basic training, then we went to gunnery school, then we went to flight training, and then overseas.

CLARKE: So, we're going to get into this later, but just so our listenership understands, how long were you in the military?

SABO: Actually, I enlisted in '43, about March. But I didn't go in until February of '44, and I had enough points to get out on November 7th of 1945. So I was in, approximately 2 years. A little less than two years.

CLARKE: All right, so those are the basics.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: As far as your service goes? We'll get into what a staff sergeant does and all that stuff later.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: So, where did you grow up Walter?

SABO: I grew up here in Chicago. I did have relations out in Michigan, during the Depression I lived with my aunt and uncle out in Michigan. They had an 80 acre

farm out there, and I did chores and things of that sort. And, of course, grew up in the Depression, so know what it was really like for people who had very little money at that time. Very few jobs, I think the unemployment rate was about 25%, which included my father.

CLARKE: Anybody and everybody that I talk to from the WWII Era, they talk about the Depression, this was a very major part of the way you think in some ways, is it not?

SABO: Oh yes, you always pay, almost, cash for everything that we buy. Except for the mortgage, and things of that nature.

CLARKE: So, you did some growing up in Chicago, and then also some in Michigan with some relatives, what was growing up like for you? How would you describe your childhood?

SABO: It was wonderful. I never really wanted to grow up, I felt like Peter Pan. Because in the city, of course, you were crowded and there were lots of people around. But out on the farm you had nature, you had animals, you had things of that sort. So, I had always said that if I could, I would stay young forever, you know? And live a Peter Pan life.

CLARKE: Tell me a little bit about your mom and dad?

SABO: Well, my father came from Hungary, and my mother came from Austria-Hungary. But my father received a work permit and he came to the United States in 1908. And at that time, that was shortly after the San Francisco earthquake, and, evidently, the local papers had published that the United States was looking for a craftsman to help rebuild the city. So my dad's plan was to go to America where money grew on trees, and send money back, and buy an apartment house with his mother, in the town of Kecskemet, Hungary. But what had happened was that, when his mother bought the house, she included his five brothers. So Nick was sending the money back to Hungary for the building, and his mother was investing it into the apartment building, and his brothers, of course, probably moved in rent free when they got married. I don't know if you want to include that in the conversation.

CLARKE: So did your father serve in the military?

SABO: He did serve in the Hungarian Army. Actually, he was apprenticed out at thirteen years old as a cabinet maker/carpenter, and he said that the first year he mainly

was a baby sitter for the boss' wife. And he was doing dishes and changing diapers and babysitting, and doing everything like that, and as the years went along, of course, then he started to pick up the trade, and the owner assigned him various different jobs. As it progressed, there was less and less where he had to do menial tasks. But mainly the first couple of years, it was go for, run for, and do for.

CLARKE: So you're a young man, you're growing up in America, you've got this life between city and country.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: And the world is gearing up for war.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: Has just gone through a war. And is gearing up for another world war?

SABO: That's correct.

CLARKE: How much of that were you aware of when you were a kid?

SABO: Quite a bit, because my mother was very astute, and she realized that the, nothing good would come of getting involved in a war. And, of course, as we know, there were millions and millions of people that were affected, including me. Of course, at that time, when the different things started happening, I was relatively young. I imagine probably the Ethiopian war, between the Italians and the Ethiopians, were the on-start of the various troubles that were happening in the world at the time.

CLARKE: Was she reading the newspaper, listening to the radio? How was she letting you know about these things?

SABO: I think, I do remember, we had extra newspapers that would come out, and when Germany declared war on Russia, my mother said, "That's the finish of the German Army". Because she realized, evidently, from her learning about history or whatever, you know, Napoleon wasn't able to do it, and of course the German's weren't either. Just too big an objective to win.

CLARKE: So you were drafted?

SABO: No, I enlisted.

CLARKE: Or you volunteered? You enlisted.

SABO: No, I enlisted, I was going to high school at Lane. That was an all-boys school at that time, a technical school. And what would happen, if you enlisted, you could choose the service that you would go into, providing the draft board had no objections. Of course, I graduated high school and I started college before I had to go in.

CLARKE: So you felt like it was a 'had to'?

SABO: Oh yes. But, evidently they had an opening in the Air Force, and then I went into the Air Force.

CLARKE: What do you remember about your high school days, and your early college days, in regards to what other people were talking about, the conversations you were having with people about the war?

SABO: I think there was very little that I remember. Mainly, I got most of my information from my parents. I did have, two of my best friends were killed in the war. One on a B-29, in the Pacific, and the other on the other side of the world, got hit by flak from a German 88, he became a cripple. He lived for about ten years, but he was a cripple and he had to use these elbow crutches like that, and two beautiful young men that I still say prayers for.

CLARKE: You went to high school with them?

SABO: Yes, they were my best friends.

CLARKE: We'll talk a little more about them as we get further into the story.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: So you decided that it was time, you got your slot in the Air Force. Why don't you tell me about your first impression of?

SABO: Military life?

CLARKE: When you're a private, and you're just in, and the world is at war?

SABO: Ok. Well, the first week we were sent to Ft. Sheridan, and, of course, we were issued all of our clothing and things of that sort. I do remember that whenever we'd go to the mess hall, there were more or less like picnic benches you ate off of, the ends were always unoccupied. And, of course, we wondered the reason

why. It was usually the ones that sat at the end of the bench table, would have to go get the milk, or whatever you needed, the coffee, or whatever. That was part of being a private. And then, we got our assignments, we had our clothing, and a little bit of military training. But then we were shipped to of all places, Miami Beach, Florida, which the Army Air Force had taken over some of the hotels down there. And we were at the Traymore Hotel, which was on the third floor with an ocean view. But there were actually FIVE of us in one room. There was one bed, and I think two bunk beds.

CLARKE: What did you do?

SABO: I ended up in a bunk, the view was terrific, but everything else, it steadily went downhill from there

CLARKE: How do you mean?

SABO: It seemed like the bases that I went to after that weren't quite as elegant as Miami Beach. Although, at that time we were restricted, we couldn't go in to see the night life or anything like that, until we completed our basic training, which I think was about, probably about ten weeks.

CLARKE: Who do you remember from that time? Somebody you went through basic with?

SABO: Well, I do remember the little corporal, coming around, we had inspection every morning, and he would check us out to see if we were properly dressed and had the right clothing on and everything like that. And he came to me, took a look at me, and said, frothing at the mouth, jumping up and down, "Soldier, get that peach fuzz off your face!" I had never shaved! So I had to use my shaving kit, but I think I fooled him because they gave us a shaver and two packages of razor blades, and I came back from the war with one package unopened. I was very light-bearded. Yeah, that I remember. And of course, the sergeant was probably not a friend of ours. He was just a sergeant, you know, that you had to follow the rules that were going on at that time. Let's see...what else can I remember?

CLARKE: Let me ask you a question: all that training that you went through and all that stuff. In your recollection of thinking back on your experience during World War II, did that just go by in the blink of an eye? Or was it...

SABO: No, I remembered it, fairly well. Actually, my son asked me to, I had some free time, I had more or less semi-retired, and he said, "Why don't you write about your war experiences?" Which I did, and as I started writing it, I kept

remembering more and more about different things that happened to me. So those were a couple of the things that happened in basic training. And of course we had drill sergeants which everybody hated. And, that was part of the Army life.

CLARKE: Any buddies from that time? Or did everybody kind of get...

SABO: Uh, no, we mostly got separated. In fact, when I went in with this one friend of mine, who got lost on the B-29 over in the Pacific, he and I went through basic training together. So we kept up a correspondence until he got killed.

CLARKE: I want to hear more about that story as we get into your...

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: Into your service overseas, and what that was like. So after basic training, you guys all get separated out, did you go straight to your unit? What did you do after that? You probably went to an airbase or something like that?

SABO: Yes, yes, we went to Kingman, Arizona and that was an aerial gunnery school. And what they did, they had various types of aircraft identification, all military training as far as marching goes, and they had regular classes. And basically what I wanted to do was become a pilot, but the Army Air Force had scads and scads of pilots, and they needed crewmen for all of the other positions. So they had rather high standards, and, evidently, I did not meet those high standards.

CLARKE: So how many different positions did you train for as a crewman?

SABO: Well, all different types of military guns, machine guns, the 50-caliber machine gun, turret training. Usually, the top turret training, not too much ball turret training. But then we would go through different programs like learning to parachute out and jump out. But I guess the Air Force didn't trust any of their soldiers to actually do a jump, so I never did a parachute jump, but all the processes going into a parachute jump they trained you for. And then when you were in the pool with the body of the plane, you know, where you would release the raft, and what window you would go out: certain crew members would go out on one side and certain crew members would go out on the other side, and get the life rafts. And then the Mae Wests, of course, we had on, which were the military flotation devices.

CLARKE: What do you remember thinking when you were being trained for all that stuff?

SABO: "I wish I was somewhere else!" I guess I just accepted it, you know, I knew my parents were from a foreign country, and they became staunch Americans, and I wouldn't let them down. Or perhaps, even my church, and my school, and my friends.

CLARKE: Weren't going to let them down.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: Let's get into a little bit about some specifics of what you and the other guys might have talked about when you were going through for this other stuff. You knew you were getting ready for some serious business.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: This is serious stuff here.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: You might have wanted to be anywhere but, but you were never going do anything but get ready to the best. But what were you guys talking about? When you were allowed to talk?

SABO: Oh yeah, oh we were allowed to talk. I just don't know if I can answer that question. I know we didn't talk much politics, I really can't remember.

CLARKE: Was it mostly then, technical stuff? Like this is how this works, and working out problems?

SABO: Oh yeah, we did that. And sometimes, you'd have somebody who had experience in doing some of the things, and you would listen to what they had to say. But it was mostly a learning experience. Learning how to shoot a gun. How to somehow protect yourself if you were trying to survive, survivor tactics and things of that sort.

CLARKE: Serious stuff, getting ready for combat?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: And you knew it?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: So, how aware were you of what was going on in the war, as you were going through all this training? Were they keeping you up to date? Were there ways to get this information?

SABO: Oh yeah, we had the, I can't remember the name of the paper, but anyway it was a military paper that they published. And it more or less covered some of the battles that were going on, and some of the tactics that were being used. That, and then of course, one fellow would have a radio, and perhaps he might listen to a news program or whatever. But other than that, I think we were more or less just immersed in our training.

CLARKE: So your mom said earlier in your life, "That that's it for Germany", how did you feel about the prospects of the war at the time?

SABO: I felt the same way. I felt that it would be hopeless to get involved, but there were quite a few people that probably felt similar, but you went ahead and did what you had to do, and that was the job that I had.

CLARKE: How did you feel about the prospects of the Allies winning at the time when you were doing your training? Did you know they were going to win or did you just hope?

SABO: Well, we didn't know when the war would end or anything like that, but we started reading about some of the different battles, you know, where, it was the invasion of Africa, and, of course, at that time in my training, I didn't realize it, but that was when the 15th Air Force branched off from the 8th Air Force and came up with an expeditionary war that was going on in Africa. So as the Allies advanced, the bases moved further East in Africa, and finally by the time I got over there, the 15th Air Force was based in Italy.

CLARKE: I have a note here that says you were in Dyersburg?

SABO: Dyersburg, Tennessee, that's where we met up with the crew. And at that time, all of us were unassigned, including the pilot, the co-pilot, and so on and so forth. But anyway, they came up with a basic team group, and there were four unassigned gunnery positions. The two side gunners, the tail gunner, and the ball turret gunner. And what happened was the pilot came to us and he said, "Who's going to volunteer for the ball turret?" and I looked at my one companion, and he was 6-foot-1, and the other was 5-foot-10 and the other was 5-foot-8, and I said, "I'll volunteer", because I was the shortest! I would've been picked anyway, so that's how we came up with the positions.

CLARKE: Did you know what you were getting into when you got into that position?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: Want to tell me a little bit about what you were getting into?

SABO: Well, mainly I was frightened.

CLARKE: What did you hear about it?

SABO: Well, there was no way you could take a parachute into a ball turret, so the parachute had to be inside the aircraft, and what happened on one of my training missions, where I took the position in the ball, I looked at it, and the worm lock, on one side, the handle was broken off. But the other side, the handle was still on. So I clipped it together, and I figure, "I'm sure when they built this ball turret they figured that a 200% or 300% safety factor" but what actually happened, when we were up in the air, about 10,000 feet, the back of the door flew off into the air stream! But luckily, they also had a belt that came around the back that you could hook on like that, and I kept being like, sucked out, and I think I took the control handles, which also had the triggers on them, I pushed them so far forward I thought maybe I broke them! I didn't, so anyway.

CLARKE: So that happened during training?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: So you knew what you were getting into?

SABO: Right. Right. And then the pilot, you know after they landed, they all would have to make a report, and he said, "Well, what happened there?" and I told him, I said, "Well, the handle was broken, and I figured it would be safe enough," so it wasn't counted against me that I used up part of the airplane.

CLARKE: So you're standing there, there's those four open position?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: And you're joining that crew?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: And you take the ball turret?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: Do you remember the names of some of the guys that were on your crew?

SABO: Yes, I do. I have a listing of them. Would you want the names now?

CLARKE: If I could get a list that would be great, we could put it on the website or something like that. But who were your closest mates?

SABO: Well, it actually would be the tail gunner. He was a rancher's son from Oregon. And strangely enough, after the war, I wrote to each of the crew members, the only one, we had promised each other that we would write, was the tail gunner, so he and I kept up the relationship, until he passed away. But I did find out, I thought I was the last man standing, but I did find out that at that time the copilot was still alive and the flight engineer was still alive.

CLARKE: What was the tail gunner's name?

SABO: Lloyd Bartlemy he was from Oregon. I can't remember the name of the town, not just yet. But I did, after the war, I had come back to Chicago, well anyway, that's a different story. But one of the things, he did invite me out there for wheat season. So I went out there and I became a driver on his ranch, driving a grain truck, for him. And then a couple times after that, I took my son to see him, and then I think I went one other time on my own. Or did we go and see him twice? I think I went and saw him once...but anyways, it was a different life. Very interesting.

CLARKE: So you guys are assigned your plane, you've got, your peach fuzz is gone?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: You're all young men?

SABO: Right, I think the pilot was twenty-eight he was the oldest.

CLARKE: How old were you at this time?

SABO: I would be, well at the time, I'd be, nineteen.

CLARKE: So tell me a little bit about, you've got your crew, have you gotten your plane yet?

SABO: No.

CLARKE: Okay, so you've just got your crew, but you don't know your plane is just yet?

SABO: Right. And after we've finished our flight training down in Dyersburg, we had, we came in second on the crew efficiency and physical tests, and so on and so forth, but at any rate they sent us to Lincoln, Nebraska. And in Lincoln, Nebraska, they assigned a brand new B-17 for us to fly overseas, and deliver to headquarters in Foggia, Italy, so that was an experience flying over there. Because we couldn't do it in one stop, like the planes do now. First, we flew to Bangor, Maine, I don't recall then name of the airport there. But prior to that, the radioman lived in New York, and the pilot and the rest of the crew, I guess, sort of said, "Well, let's stop in and see his parents," because the radioman was in contact with a radio ham that was in contact with his family. So we made an excuse to land the airplane in this town in New York, and the radio man's father and mother showed up and took the crew to dinner. But, Walter, they needed somebody to watch the plane, so I got assigned that duty. So, I got even with everybody, I took all of their bayonets and started throwing them at the trees, just for fun.

CLARKE: While you were waiting?

SABO: Yeah, as I was guarding the plane.

CLARKE: So you didn't get to go out and hang around with everybody?

SABO: No, no. And then in Bangor, Maine, what happened was, that they had a...um...what's it called...I'm trying to think of...I need to pause... about being an enlisted man! An NCO. I'm ready to go. They had an NCO party, so we decided amongst the crew that we would dress our officers up as NCO's. So the pilot was wearing one of my extra uniforms, and the bigger guys, we gave to the navigator and the bombardier and the copilot. Then all ten of us went to this NCO party. But there was very few single ladies there, but there was a lot of booze, so we all had a good time.

CLARKE: This was in Maine?

SABO: Yeah, and then from Bangor, Maine, we went to Newfoundland, and I just can't recall the name of the airbase in Newfoundland. And then from Newfoundland we went to the Azores Islands, which are islands right off of Portugal. And then from the Azores Islands, we flew into Marrakesh, North Africa, which was French Morocco at that time, I believe. And then we flew up to Tunis, and we got to Tunis and we usually stayed overnight, and then we flew the plane to Foggia, and when we got to Foggia they told us, you know, we'll keep the plane but we're sending you to Lucera, you'll get a plane in Lucera. So, when we landed in Lucera, of course the first couple of days, we just got used to the base, and the

big day came for us to see our plane, so we went out to the revetment, and there was the Virginia Gentleman, which had gone through combat missions already. And when you looked at it from the front, the right wing looked lower than the left wing. There was a name on it, the Virginia Gentleman; none of us were from Virginia, but we talked it over and said, "That's good enough. We'll leave the name on it."

CLARKE: Was there any art on the nose cone?

SABO: Yes, there was, there was a Kentucky Colonel, he was leaning on a cane, and in his other hand he had a mint julep.

CLARKE: That was your plane?

SABO: That was our plane.

CLARKE: You said you had a discussion over it, you could have renamed it?

SABO: We could have renamed it and had different art work put on it, but we decided to leave it as it was.

CLARKE: So you're a whole new crew, and where'd the crew go before that? Were they assigned to another plane? Did you ever hear?

SABO: No, it was the same crew we had in Dyersburg.

CLARKE: I mean, the guys who flew the Virginia Gentleman before you?

SABO: Oh, they'd completed their missions, and they had gone back to the States. I think the name of the pilot, the previous pilot was still on the plane, but that got painted out. But actually, on one of our missions after that, I can't remember, I have it written down somewhere, I can't remember...we were flying over the target at 26,000 feet, and all of a sudden, the plane kicked up like that. And the wings were at an angle, and the pilot was from...oh I forget...Carolina, you know, "Say, Bo, do ya'll see anything down there?" Because I could circle the ball turret 360 degrees, and also 90 degrees down. I said, "No sir, I don't see anything down here." He asked the top turret gunner, he said, he did the same thing I did. And he couldn't see any damage to the plane. But when we landed, we landed, we all ran out and took a look at the right wing, and an 88 had gone through our right wing, right where the nacelle of the engine fared into the wing. And when we got out to look at it, we could see the metal sticking up like that. Evidently, the shell was either, they usually set them for altitudes, and, evidently,

it was set for a higher altitude and it didn't hit the engine or the gas tank, so we survived. But the pilot did say, you know, it was funny, the left wing was dragging and he could set the features on the plane where it would compensate for that. So the left wing was dragging, he said, "On the way back, the right wing was dragging, so I knew something was wrong"

CLARKE: Is that one of your first missions?

SABO: No, probably it was about the tenth mission.

CLARKE: Well, before we get there I want to talk about your missions, because you did twenty-nine I've been told, so that was your tenth in, so there's a number of missions in between. Before we get into that, I want to keep going into a little of that setting the scene: you've joined the Virginia Gentlemen, you're the new crew of the Virginia Gentleman?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: You're the ball gun turret guy, and that's your job. What is that you had to do to have that job, what did you have to do before you took off?

SABO: Oh, actually, you would, the guns would have to be taken apart, and that would be the mechanism that was removable, and you had to oil them to make sure that they had oil on them so they wouldn't rust up. And the following mission that you went on, you had to take the same parts and clean them off completely. Because these planes were not pressurized, they were exposed to the elements, so actually this was in the winter of '44 and '45. The temperature would be forty degrees below zero at the heights we flew at, so even the clothing we had to be very careful with. We'd start off with our woolen socks, well, first we'd start off with our long underwear. Then we'd put on our woolen socks and our khakis, and over our khakis we had electrical flying suits, we would have like a pants and a vest and you could plug those two in. And you also had electrical boots that would fit inside our regular flying boots which you would plug in too. So these were electrical socks. And then the vests would be plugged into the plane electrical system, I think it was a twenty-four volt system they had on those planes.

CLARKE: Otherwise you would have frozen to death?

SABO: Right. The only thing that you could leave exposed was around your eyes. Because evidently there is enough blood vessels there to counteract the forty

degrees below zero. Because while the plane was not -- they had some relatively, heat ducts on it, it was not really heated, so the temperature was there, but you were out of the wind. You weren't in the wind.

CLARKE: You're down in a ball gun turret.

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: So you're surrounded by...why don't you describe, you've just described what you put on and what you had to do before you went on a mission?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: So tell me a little bit about climbing into your seat, and what you, what the view of the ball gun turret is?

SABO: Well, I would probably say that I saw more than anybody else on the plane. Because I, of course, was down at the bottom, and I could check everything out. Mainly our job was to look for any of the fighter planes that would be coming up and try to stop us from completing a mission. And you had the controls, you had like foot pedals that could control the reticle bomb sights on it. Target sights. And what would happen, say, a particular German plane would have such and such wing span, you could set the dial to the wing span of the plane, and you would try and keep, with your foot pedals, you would try to keep the wings within these reticle sights. Of course, I'm sure if a fighter plane came in you wouldn't bother with trying to set a dial for the width of the wingspan on the plane. You'd just probably would try and do the best that you could. We recognized most of the German fighter planes. That would always be brought up, even when we were overseas you would go through a lift up program to check out the different fighter planes that the Germans had.

CLARKE: Let's go back to your first mission then. You strap in, you've got your electrical socks and your vest and your pants, and you're in the plane, what are your recollections from that first mission?

SABO: Well, what happened, they did not let the copilot fly with us, because instead of the copilot they put an experienced pilot, and our regular pilot would be basically the copilot. However, [laughs], this experienced pilot was flak-happy. And as we went -- now this was on the first mission -- as we were flying in formation, he's gradually going out of position like that. So our pilot, our regular pilot is saying, "We've got to get back into the correct position!" and then the

leader of our flight, the same thing with him, he kept telling the experienced pilot that we had, "You're getting out of position". Well, when a plane, when the formation goes up to a target, it doesn't go in a straight line, more or less you were trying to make off that we were going to a different position. So we would zig, and we would zag, and we would zig and zag. Well, the formation zigged. And our experienced pilot zagged. So we were alone. We couldn't find our formation anymore.

CLARKE: This is your first mission?

SABO: Our first mission!

CLARKE: What does flak-happy mean?

SABO: Somebody...I found this out later on, so I don't want to besmirch the name of the pilot, but he had lost part of his crew, and he had become so...nervous and agitated like that, that he no longer would use common sense. Because if you got out of formation, actually, that's what the Germans were looking for, they would pick off these lone planes that they could see. There was some plane that had fallen behind the formation and they would try and shoot them down first, before they would tackle a whole formation of bombers. But anyway, as we're flying alone, with no cover, no aircraft cover for us, like our fighter planes, we started heading back to the base. And our navigator, we had an excellent navigator, he was trying to direct us away from any German flak guns, and we still had the bombs aboard the plane. So instead of being heroes, we unfused the bombs and dropped them, just out of the plane, and we headed for home. Because, what my aunt would say, "Walter, better be a coward than a dead hero!" and I think the rest of the crew felt the same way! But anyway.

CLARKE: So what was up with this pilot then? What happened after this? You get back to base and then...?

SABO: Oh yeah, he got, our pilot said that he would never fly with him again, he said, "You can court martial me, but I won't fly with that man again". And we found out from one of the tent-mates that I had told previously the night before, that he was gonna be our first pilot, he said he was aghast, but he said, "I don't think I should tell Walt anything about this pilot. But he had lost part of his crew and just...didn't have the ability to accept that fact," or whatever. But anyway, if they were nervous, or whatever, we call them flak-happy. I don't know if I can describe it in any other way.

CLARKE: No, that's good. So, let's go to your second mission, because you have this first mission that went awry?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: And now you have your second mission...give me an idea of what a formation is?

SABO: Well, actually, a formation, there would be four planes. There would be the lead, and there would be a high-right, and a low-left, and then there would be a diamond. So basically, the lead plane and the diamond would be in line with each other, except that the diamond would be a little bit lower in altitude. And the high right would be up and to the right of us, and the low-left would be to the left of us. And then that would be four planes. But then we would have a formation where we would have four of those. So you would have the same high-right with four planes, you'd have the lead with four planes, you'd have the low-left with four planes, and you'd have the diamond with four-planes. That would be the formation. That would be sixteen. Once in a while, you know if you had a special mission, or that wanted to show the Germans that we could put up even more planes, there would be an additional plane stuck somewhere in this formation. So it could be from the sixteen to maybe a twenty-five or whatever.

CLARKE: So your second mission you go out on, you're in one of these formations?

SABO: Yes, and after that, I would say, 98% of the time, we were all frightened out of our wits. Because you would see up ahead of you this black cloud. And you had to fly through it, because it was over the target. And what would happen would be, as these shells would explode, if they were far enough away they would hit the outside of the plane and bounce off. If they were relatively closer, they would go through one side and rattle around on the inside of the plane, and if they were real close they would go through the plane, which is like what this 88 did with our wing. If it went right through and kept on going. But most of the time these shells would explode at the right altitude, the Germans had radar and they would have to set their shells. If they had proximity fuses on those shells, I think we might have lost many many many more planes, or maybe all of them. Because every once in a while, they had second thoughts about doing daylight bomb raiding.

CLARKE: So you're down there in the ball gun turret, you're seeing, what can you see of the formation when you're down there?

SABO: Well, actually, uh.

CLARKE: Can you see it? Kind of around you?

SABO: You couldn't see any of the top formations, you know, but you could see any of the bottom ones. It depended on what position you were in, you know. If I was in the high-right, I could see the planes all to the left, and the lead plane, I could see all of that. But if I was, say, in the diamond position, and we were, say, at the lower level in the formation, then you would just see the scenery down below [Laughs], scenery, right.

CLARKE: So, I want to get into a little bit of the tough stuff, of about being up in the air. My grandfather was a staff sergeant, he was an armorer for a P-38. So, he's the guy making sure everything is right before they go up. His stories were often about, you know, the planes that didn't come home. Because these were his planes, he took care of these planes, he was in the armorer; he was the ordnance guy, and they just would not come home. So let's talk a little bit about what you saw with people not coming home.

SABO: Actually, you could see a plane exploding. There would just be debris flying around. That was one of the important things they briefed you about when you got back, was, what plane went down? You know, in regards to the formation. How many parachutes that you saw coming out of it, and I guess what they tried to do was relate all of these different things to try to figure out what their casualties were and perhaps their prisoner of war, what that would entail.

CLARKE: So how much of that did you see?

SABO: All of it.

CLARKE: How many planes do you think you saw shot out of the sky?

SABO: I'd say, once in a while you'd have a milk run. A milk run would be where it was poorly defended, and all would come back. But like, we went with the 15th Air Force, the longest mission that they had in Europe. We flew from our base in Lucera, Italy to Berlin, Germany. But, because the distance was so far, we only had half a bombload. And I always figured we could have flown further, but we would have had to throw a wrench at the enemy. But at any rate, that was the furthest we flew, I think it came pretty close to 1990 miles, something like that, there and back. And like I said, going up, probably at that time, because the target was so far away, we probably flew in a straight line. But for some of these shorter targets we would sort of zig-zag up.

CLARKE: So tell me about, you told me about the mission where you had the 88 go through your wing?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: Was that your most harrowing mission, or was there a tougher one that you remember?

SABO: Oh, there's another one that I remember. We would all, after you got your equipment, and you had previously dressed and everything like that, you had an indication of the target that you were going to attack, and what would happen, we would all be gathered, the officers would be in front, and the enlisted men would be in back, and they would say, "Well, this is the target, this is the direction we're going to be coming in, and this is what we're going to do." And sometimes they would have an aerial map of the target area, and I've got it listed somewhere, but I don't remember offhand; what happened was that we were going to bomb this town that was in the Brenner Pass, which was a connection between Italy and Germany, and the target was laid out, it was going to be a marshalling yard, and we'd come in over the marshalling yard, drop our bombs, there was a river, and we would include the bridge, and then on the other side of the bridge was a manufacturing plant. So as we're going to the target like that, I'm looking, the target is off to the right about two miles or three miles, and we're going to another little bridge across the river, down the river, where there's no marshalling yard, and there's no manufacturing plant. And I'm scratching my head, I said, "This guy, this bombardier is way off the target!" So sure enough, we bomb this lonesome bridge, ha-ha, so normally, when we got back, normally, we had like maybe a day of rest, or a couple of days of rest, sometimes the weather was a factor. But on this mission, we were picked to fly the very next day, and then the, not the commandant of our air force, but the adjutant [said], "If you guys don't bomb the right target, I'm ordering the planes to make a 360 degree circle and come back over the target at the same altitude". Well, that should scare anybody, because by that time the Germans had figured out: well, they weren't at 26,200 feet, they were at 26,000 feet, you know. Just a two-hundred-foot difference. So somebody that was there should have jumped up in the air and said, "You son of a gun! If you ordered us to make a 360 and go over the target again, I'll shoot you right here and now!" because we had our 45's with us. That was another experience that went awry.

CLARKE: You're a gunner?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: So did you have to put those guns to use?

SABO: Not really. What happened, we would have a German plane, maybe, fly through the formation, trying to get away from our escort, and basically, at that time, we stayed in formation and I imagined, the German pilots looked at the formations and said, instead of them tackling the formation, because there could be, maybe, out of the...what did I say... twelve planes, there could be thirty-two guns pointing at him. We had control of the guns. He would have to take his plane and aim it at the bomber, so the plane, the German fighter itself was the aiming mechanism. And he would have a concentration of 50-caliber bullets whizzing past him. And incidentally, our 50 caliber browning's looked pretty awful, because they showed us one of the German machine guns that they had and it was a beautifully laid out, beautifully machined and everything like that. But they ended up putting cannons in their arsenal instead of a machine gun in the planes. So they had, I think 20-caliber cannon.

CLARKE: So tell me a little bit about your squadron and you group, for those people that don't understand how the Army Air Force was organized. Because you had your squadron, and then you had your larger group, what was that like?

SABO: What happened, there were six wings in the 15th Air Force, and I could never figure it out: they had five wings were B-24s, and one wing was the B-17s. Now, the reason that I think that they had it that was because the B-17 had a different designed wing. We could go at a higher altitude than the B-24 could. Now supposedly, a B-24 had a longer range, a faster speed and a longer range, but they didn't have the altitude. And on one of our other missions, what had happened, normally, if we knew the target area was going to be hemmed in by the weather, or if even the direction going up there, there would be a storm, we would stand down. They would cancel the mission. In this particular case, the weather conditions changed on our way up there, so the target was shrouded in clouds. And we had, of course, the Norden bombsight. And basically, we climbed to 31,000 feet, I think 31,500 feet. The B-24's couldn't get up that high. So we bombed with our bombsight, you know, through the weather. Whether we hit the target or not I don't know. I don't remember that.

CLARKE: So you have the B-24s, you have the B-17s?

SABO: Right. Now in the 8th Air Force, as far as I can tell, it was different. They had many more B-17s than B-24s. And it might be that the B-24 was a later designed bomber, heavy bomber.

CLARKE: So you're with the 301st Bombardment Group, correct?

SABO: Right.

CLARKE: With the 353rd Squadron?

SABO: Right. Now like I said, the 301st, probably had six squadrons. And then the B-24s were in the other squadrons. But it was something like a 6:1 ratio.

CLARKE: What do you remember thinking about aerial combat...? Let me- have you read **Catch-22**?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: The humorous book, that is famous about kind of, capturing the perspective of aerial combat? What are your thoughts about it? Because that was kind of his way of saying, "This is what it's like and this is what it's not like", and it was a fiction book, so it was kind of made up. But what are your thoughts on aerial combat? What it felt like being there. You'd mentioned being scared, but there are other things beyond that. You mentioned the black cloud that you had to fly into.

SABO: Right, right.

CLARKE: But there are other things. What do you remember?

SABO: Well, let's stop and see. Let me think of one...

CLARKE: Well, I imagine every now and you were thinking, what the heck are we doing? This is not a good idea?

SABO: Well, I always crossed myself and said a prayer before I went over a target. Incidentally, when we went to rest camp, I chose the Rome area, because I saw Pope Pius the Sixth, I think. And, of course, all of the edifices that were in Rome, the Colosseum, and a lot of the fellows went to Naples, the Isle of Capris, things of that sort. But my thoughts...well, we more or less kept up with the newspaper that they put out. And then there were a lot of propaganda programs that were going on. Lord Haw Haw, I think I heard him once and then they also had Axis

Sally, or whatever. And they would tell, "Well, the 301st Bomb Group bombed such-and-such and they were very inaccurate," and so on and so forth.

CLARKE: You got to hear some of that?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: That's very interesting.

SABO: And we heard Churchill, too, when he gave one of those speeches. I remember that. But other than that, we got electricity in our tent. I'd say, probably, about in February of '45. And prior to that we had a five man tent, and one of the things that they decided was that if, in a five man tent, you could have two fellows from the same crew, and two fellows from another crew, and an oddball. And I was the oddball in our tent. So what happened, was that two of the fellows they went out on a mission, and we were standing down, the other three of us were standing down, and they didn't come back. So I went down to headquarters and I asked, I said, "What happened to such-and-such fellow", you know. And he said, "Well, as far as we can surmise, they were hit by flak like that, and they couldn't keep up with the formation, and we think they went down". So sure enough, that night, the three of us got potched, drinking alcohol or whatever, you know. And then one month later, who should come walking in, but Jim and Chief, the other fellow's name was Chief. And what had happened, they had gone down, they got as far as Yugoslavia, and they bailed out, and, actually, Yugoslavia at that time was in turmoil: because you had the Chetniks, which were the royalists, you had the partisans that were the Communists, you had the Yustashi that were the German hired military men, I don't know if many people realized that the Germans had mercenaries. And then you had the German Army, and you had the Gestapo. And probably many other things. Well, they always said that if you went down, try to get in with either the Chetniks, which were the royalists, or the partisans that were the Communists, and they would try and get you back to a place in Yugoslavia where we could send one of our planes over and pick you up. And that's just what happened to them. He said, "It's Jim Martin and Chief." Don't remember his name, but anyway, when they bailed out, they were fairly close to each other. So Chief said, "Hey Jim, how you doing?" "PSHSHHH," because there were cannons shooting off in the background like that. So anyway they landed, and, luckily, I think they landed with the partisans, which were the Communists, he said that night, you know, they got serenaded by the Communist women soldiers that came and started singing some songs to them. He said they weren't very good. But anyway, it took

them, I'd say pretty close to a month! But we never realized they were on their way back or anything like that, we thought that they were lost. And when they did get back, they were back for a while like that, and then some organization sent them a little pin that they could pin on their blouse, and it was a caterpillar, and the caterpillar indicated that they managed to get back from being in the enemy territory.

CLARKE: They bailed out of the Caterpillar Club?

SABO: Oh is that, you've heard of it?

CLARKE: Yeah, I have. Its people that get out of the plane and successfully make it back, basically?

SABO: Yeah!

CLARKE: Survived your forced exit?

SABO: Right. Right. And then, of course, they were the oldest crew, and I was the next. And then the other two were from a younger crew. When I say younger, I'm talking about the number of missions. Jim Martin and Chief, we called him, we had a going away party for them, and they went back to the States, you know. I think I wrote Jim a couple of times, but never got an answer so I stopped wiring, you know. Well, it's kind of hard to try and bring back any memories, or anything of that sort with the previous fellows that you flew with or you met in the military. The only one that I had was the tail gunner, and we were very, very, we promised each other that we would write. No matter what.

CLARKE: Why do you think that it's hard?

SABO: Well, I guess because it's such a different life, you know. You're back home again, with your girlfriends or with your wife, or whatever like that. And you're looking for a job or maybe planning on going back to school or whatever. But you just don't have the same camaraderie that you had when you were in the service.

CLARKE: So it just kind of goes away?

SABO: Yah, like I said, I think I might have got one or two letters back, but I made it a point that I would write them all. And like I said, the only one that continued on was the tail gunner.

CUT from approx. 1:05:05 to 1:05:24.0 Ken asking Sabo if he needs a break.

CLARKE: The World War II generation, you, are notorious about not talking about your military service. Let me give you an example: my grandfather, again, he taught me how to hunt and shoot and find my way in the woods and all that practical stuff that he probably picked up in the military, you know, and life and things like that. But he never really talked about his time in the military. But he told one story, and it was a story about a pilot that came in and crashed on a training mission and died. And it really got him choked up, every time he told that story. And I asked him, I said, "Well, did you know that guy?" and "No, no. You know I worked on his plane but I didn't really know him. He was an officer, I was an NCO so there wasn't really any camaraderie there. And it wasn't until he had passed away, he died in 2009 he died, and I got all the squadron records, and all group records, you can get those at Maxwell Air Force Base, so you could get yours too. The whole thing, on paper if you want. And I got those, and I found the moment that he was talking about. The pilot, died the day after VE day.

SABO: Wow!

CLARKE: And it just, it broke up the entire celebration of victory, for the entire 370th Group. And an officer wrote that story in there, and so I finally understood why he was upset by this moment, you know? This guy, he died a needless death. He was on his way home, you know, how tragic. But my grandfather never talked about all the guys who never came back. And you get into those records, and its lots of P-38s never came back. And I can understand why he didn't talk about it, because it was tough to talk about.

SABO: Well, what happened, like I said, my sonny boy, when I retired, semi-retired, he said, "Dad, you've got time on your hands, you know a little bit about computers; why don't you write your story?" And like I said before, when I started, things kept coming back. And prior to that I never talked about it either. Because I figured, well, somebody was really a hero, and it wasn't me! I always remembered what my aunt said, you know, and I'd be repeating myself you know, but nobody loves a dead coward.

CLARKE: What came back when you were writing that surprised you? That you hadn't remembered but came back to you?

SABO: Yeah, plus the fact, I'm sorry that I didn't keep a written record. But my friend, the tail gunner did. And he was the one that reminded me of a couple of stories, you know, the one fellow that was, that came into our ten that was a late-comer to the war. And his parents were from Germany, and the boy could speak

German, very excellent. But anyway, I went to lunch with the tail gunner and him a few times, to the mess hall, and on one of the missions, the boy's plane blew up, and he was lost, you know. And a couple days later, my tail gunner said that he was going through his stuff to send back to his home, and he had his address and everything like that, so he wrote a letter to these people you know. And that was their only son. And he said, he could never figure out why he didn't get into something like the Intelligence group, because he would be able to decipher some of the German records and things of that sort when we occupied Germany. And in fact, I knew a little German and I was almost tempted to try and join that portion of the military at that time, but I wasn't good enough, and I knew I wasn't good enough. They would have had a training school perhaps and I would have gone through the training, I could have picked up more German language abilities.

CLARKE: You mentioned there was another story that your tail gunner had written about, that had helped you, that was surprising to you as you started to write and recollect in your service that you had forgotten about?

SABO: Yeah...let me see... it was about that boy... but anyway, he collaborated on some of the facts that I had forgotten about. And what he wrote was the number of planes that went on the missions and the temperatures that happened, and anyway, he didn't fly. He only had twenty-three missions, I had twenty-nine. The navigator had completed his tour of thirty-five missions before the war with Germany was over. So he had gone home. You know, for his thirty day leave. And anyway, he got reassigned but he had asked me for my home phone number, so he called up my folks, and my father met him down at the railway station, a very nice man, the navigator.

CUT [1:22:04-1:22:17]

CLARKE: So where were you at VE day?

SABO: D Day or?

CLARKE: VE Day?

SABO: Oh, I was overseas, I was still in Italy. And what happened, the camp commander, about six months prior to that, had advised that were all the tents were at, instead of it being on the ground, he was going to pour a cement floor and two layers of cement blocks high around the tent perimeter, and then put the tent over that. And Chief, who could speak Italian, told the workers, "Major

Mickey said that we would have three cement blocks high around our tent” and they said, “No, no, no, no” and they were arguing for a while, but, finally, they did it. And I asked Chief, I said, “What did you need the extra cement block for?” he said, when you laid in your cot, you were lower than the third cement block like that, so if anyone was shooting, they would hit the cement instead of you! And then Martin, he was like our mentor, and he was a crew member with Chief, but he had a feather sleeping bag, and the rest of us, on your cot, you know, it just had a canvas bottom like that, and you’d take a GI blanket and fold it over, and still the cold come up from underneath. Put another blanket on there and fold it over, the cold would still come up from the bottom. And because, evidently, it pressed all of the insulating air out of it, you know...but anyway you could feel it. But Martin, with his sleeping bag, would have the sleeping bag half open because he was hot enough! Which was, I don’t know, not much of a story, but we were always jealous -- “Hey, you’ve got a sleeping bag!” and what we used for heat was very primitive. What it was, it was a half steel barrel, that was turned upside down, and it was drilled hole in the side, and outside the tent we had a gasoline, where we used our 100-octane gasoline that would go through, and then we had a little valve, that you could let a drop at a time come down. And we would light it, and let it burn. If you turned it on full-force, and, of course, it would be like a torch. And that’s what, once in a while a tent would burn down on that... but that was the heating system.

CLARKE: How big was your camp? For your group?

SABO: The 301st...well, let’s see...oh it was huge. I would guess, well, I really don’t know because, you know you had your ground crew, you had your repair facilities, you had your tankers that came in with the gasoline. All in all, it would probably be, I’m sure at least 1500, maybe more. Then you had your mess halls, the officers had different mess halls than we did. And I think they had better food, because we had powdered eggs, powdered potatoes, powdered milk. And to top it off, we had butter that I seemed to think they got from the African campaign, because it seemed like it had paraffin in it. If you eat a slice of bread with a piece of butter on there, it would be like you were eating a candle along with the butter. The only time it tasted good was if you had real hot soup. Then you would be able to melt it down.

CLARKE: So did you move around from air base to air base? Did your group move around? Or were you...

SABO: No, no, we were always at the same airbase.

CLARKE: And where was that again, just for the record?

SABO: Lucera, and what happened, it would be, we had to, at least when we first got there, until we became like a seasoned crew, we had to pull guard duty. And as guard duty consisted of going out to the flight line, where the planes were parked, and they had like little kiosks there, where you could be out of the wind, but your job was to guard the plane from any kind of sabotage that was going to occur. And the one incident that happened, and I regret it to this day, the tail gunner and the waist gunner and I had a guard duty day, and we were each positioned in this kiosk by our plane. Well anyway, we knew what time the Sergeant of the Guard would show up, so the tail gunner went to the side gunners kiosk and I went to the side gunners kiosk, and we started talking, about this and that and whatever we talked about. We were starting to doze off. But anyway, it came up nearly time for the Sergeant of the Guard to come around, so we woke each other up, and the tail gunner went to his post and I went to my post, and then the Sergeant of the Guard came, and was picking up all the soldiers. And he picked me up, and we drove to the kiosk where the side gunner was at, and the side gunner didn't come out. Then I think he blew the horn once, the side gunner didn't come out. And at that time, I wish I had taken my flashlight and thrown it at the kiosk, you know, to wake the side gunner up, but I didn't. So the Sergeant of the Guard arrested the guy on the spot, and they court martialed him. Six months, he had to live in the...well it was on camp, but it was basically where the MP's were stationed at. He had to sleep in the pup tent all winter long. And, before the war was ended there, I think before the war was ended, he came around, and he had finished his six month term, and he had said, that they're shipping him back to the States. And I said, "Well, what are they going to do as far as your discharge goes?" And if I remember correctly, they were going to give him a blue discharge, which I guess was a dishonorable discharge, but the bombardier sort of snidely remarked, "Yeah, yeah", he says, "Look it, this guy did something that wasn't that bad you know, and he got out of flying over the targets like we had to do." And I thought that was very unfair.

CLARKE: Everybody was very serious, apparently. Everything was very serious, no messing around. Although it seems like there was a little bit of messing around?

SABO: Oh yeah!

CLARKE: So I have a note here that French Morocco was a place that you got to hang around a little bit, Marrakesh.

SABO: Yeah, well that was on the way back. And what we did, we skipped Tunis and we flew direct from Lucera, with the Virginia Gentleman. It was our job to fly her back.

CLARKE: So this was after VE day, the war was over?

SABO: The war was over, right.

CLARKE: What do you remember thinking when that happened? How did you find out?

SABO: I think they announced over, they had a speaker system, and everybody of course, probably got drunk, they were all shooting at the loud speakers around the camp. Because the duty assignments, we'd hear them coming over the loud speakers and things of that sort. So anyway, we went to Marrakesh, and anyway, what it would be, is that you'd usually spend the overnight hours there then fuel up, and then take off for your next spot which would be the Azores Islands, going back home. And we were about two hours over the Atlantic, and all of a sudden, the alarm bell rings, uh oh! We're over the ocean [laughs]. We got our chest packs, we were gonna have to bail out! But what happened, one of the engines- the fuel line went out on it, the oil line went out on it. And the pilot feathered the engine, he flew back to Marrakesh, were we had an engine replaced. And we had a chance then to view the Pasha's castle -- not castle but palace, and, of course, we went to the marketplace, and saw all different things there. Billions of flies. Food out on these push carts, and things of that sort. Anyway, after that then we continued on with our journey.

CLARKE: So before we get to the States, I want to ask you some questions about getting back to the States, you know. I want to ask, you know, about the friends you heard about. But before we do that, we've kind of done a circle of you flying over and flying back. But if you were to...let's say we have an eighteen-year-old signing up for the Air Force, wants to know about, what it was like to be in a B-17 during World War II, especially from your position as a ball gun turret guy. Just bear with me a little bit, I want you to tell me a story if you can, if you're willing I should say, about: from strapping into the plane, going out into a mission, and coming back. Can you tell me a story of one mission? Of what that felt like? Because if you don't tell that eighteen year-old, who's gonna? So just one mission. What that was like. And if it takes you ten minutes to tell the story, that's fine.

SABO: Well, I think I probably told you about the clothing you had to wear?

CLARKE: Yeah, you did.

SABO: And about making sure the guns were clear and clean?

CLARKE: Yeah, you did that.

SABO: Then when we'd get into the air, they would ask us to fire off a round or two, because sometimes -- oh! We would put a shell into the chamber, so that all we would have to do was pull the trigger for the machine gun to fire. And once it fired, it created enough heat that nothing would be frozen. So that's basically why we would shoot off a burst, or in our case, we would shoot off a burst to make sure that the guns would fire. Oh, when you'd get to about 12,000 feet, you'd have to put your oxygen mask on. Because you, well, you couldn't breathe, and you'd go unconscious. One of the training sessions that we had, they got us all into, there were probably thirty or forty soldiers in this one room that they could depressurize. And the instructor asked, who would take his oxygen mask off, and I said "Well, I will." And, "Okay," he says, "Start writing your name down" I did it about two times, and then the third time started fading out, fading out, and he put the oxygen mask back on my face. So in other words, you had to make sure that you had your oxygen mask on. Some of the waist gunners had like a flak jacket, which was just a vest, but with plates in it so that shrapnel wouldn't penetrate their body.

CLARKE: How did you communicate?

SABO: Oh! We had an intercoms system. And if I remember, there were like six different settings on it. One setting would be for the formation. And usually, the pilots on all the planes would be connected to the flight commander, you know, and they would stay in contact. The copilot would be connected with the rest of the crew and every, I'd say every five minutes or every ten minutes, we would check out- you know, like, "tail gunner, waist gunner," so on and so forth, to make sure that one of our oxygen masks hadn't slipped off, or that one of the tubes had been punctured or anything like that. Oh -- and incidentally on that mission that we went on, that first mission with the flak-happy pilot, he wanted to bring our plane down below the oxygen limit and the reason that he wanted to do that, I think, was that he wanted to use that as an excuse, why he lost the formation. But we were still over enemy territory, when the pilot called down to me, "Say, Bo, how far are we from the Adriatic?" I said, "That's at least a 100 miles away from here," I said, "We better --" "No, I didn't say we'd better do anything. I just told him that we're over 100 miles away from the Adriatic. So

that we shouldn't go down lower, because the lower you went, the more guns that were able to fire up at you, and perhaps reach that altitude. The '88s were the ones that we were frightened of, you know. Because when we left our base, we always flew over to the Adriatic and then up the Adriatic, and that sort of went northwest, and we could get all the way up to upper-Italy before we had to come over to land. And when we did come over to land, the Germans had these mobile, anti-aircraft guns that they wouldn't know where we were coming over, and we wouldn't know where they were, but they could move these batteries. So almost invariably as the formation came flying over, we were still probably maybe not at our full altitude because they'd go up gradually, and they would take pot shots at us.

CLARKE: What do you remember about the sounds and the smells of being..?

SABO: I don't think I remember any smells. Just the sight of them, you know, and seeing the shells explode. You saw that. And of course, you saw the planes going down. You know, you asked how many there were, it would vary depending on the target you went to you know. And like I said, there were some that were milk runs- very little opposition. There were some that were heavily armed, like when we bombed Berlin, incidentally, that was the longest trip, plus the fact that we bombed the Olympic Stadium, because they were assembling the tanks for Germany, was assembling the tanks there. So, we bombed the Olympic Stadium that Hitler had built in '36! Oh, and this was another mission that we went on, although they didn't count it, when the war was over, you asked about that. We got assigned a cook's tour they called it, and we loaded up our machine guns, no bombs, but we were full of gasoline supply, and we flew over Berchtesgaden, we were at wing-level tip with Berchtesgaden. We flew over Munich. The war was just over like two days before that or one day, I don't remember exactly what. Basically, what they were doing, they had a couple planes that did the same thing, although in a different direction than we went, we had a certain area to cover. But the people were out, they were ox carts, horse carts, people were walking on the street, and they were glad that finally this horrendous war was over. They had six years of it, and it was coming out of their ears! They probably wanted no more war. But anyway, we could not raise up any anti-aircraft guns, or anything like that, over the various targets that we flew over, so I guess they decided the war was ended then.

CLARKE: What does flying into the flak sound like?

SABO: You know, I don't remember.

CLARKE: Or was it just so loud in general that it all..?

SABO: You know, I don't know if we could even hear it. Of course we had on our flying helmets with the padded ears with our intercom system. But we could see it. And we could feel it. You could feel it, even when the bombs dropped, you know, you'd drop the bombs and the plane would shoot up into the air like that.

CLARKE: What did it feel like?

SABO: Well, I guess you got used to it. Just, you knew that the bombs were being released. And what would happen was that, they didn't need bombardiers on many of their flights. In fact, even they trained some tail gunners to be, they called them toggliers. And basically, what they'd do would be to, the lead bomber would be the one that would drop the bombs. Then everybody, well he would inform them, "Ready to drop" and they would drop their bombs then. So that was sort of like split duties for the tail gunners. Then we had camera planes. We had a camera plane, some of the side gunners would have extra cameras or the tail gunner would have extra cameras. And they would take pictures, of some of the planes going down, especially if they could. You know they'd take pictures of it. And things of interest, supposed interest.

CLARKE: So the flak going off, would that push the plane around in the air?

SABO: Yes.

CLARKE: So any equivalent to modern turbulence, or a lot worse?

SABO: Uh, well it depended how close. If it was close enough, you were finished. But you know, you could feel the plane buckle like that when the bombs dropped, you could feel it go up.

CLARKE: How long was a typical mission?

SABO: You know, I was surprised that, I was there in combat from November to May. What's that, six months? I had twenty-nine missions, and in six into twenty-nine, that's only five a month, basically. Well, we had a week off for rest camp. So I would say, probably, what would that be, about every five days? Every five days or every six days? A lot of it had to do with the weather. Because it was a terrible terrible winter, in '44 and '45. You know, you'd get prepared to go on a mission, and if you wouldn't get the blue flare, or if they shot up a red flare it was a cancellation. I would say, at least, at least twenty were probably cancelled out on

us. So, I would have had forty-nine missions! Not really, but anyway, it would have come out to that.

CLARKE: So you mentioned your longest mission into Germany to bomb Berlin, how long, as far as hours, was your typical mission?

SABO: Well, typical mission... was relatively short....let's see, 216 hours of actual time, divided by twenty-nine, that would be about nine hours, eight hours.

CLARKE: So you're up in the air a while?

SABO: Yeah, yeah, we always flew high. Probably we also just before the war ended, we did some tactical bombing. And that was where the front lines were at. And after the war ended, and we were still there because they sent the newer crews back for reassignment, because the war with Japan was still going on. Now our crew was relatively senior crew at that time, and one of the jobs that we had was to fly the supplies up for the, I think for the British 8th Army in the Po Valley and, anyway, we had to load the cases the night before, before we took off. And beautiful wooden cases from Australia. So naturally, crkkk crkkk, with a crowbar like that, we opened the cases to look, eh! Mutton! You could smell it right through the cans! But- wait a while- sardines and crackers? [Laughs] Crkkk, crkkk, crkkk, crkkk. Some of the poor fellows in the 8th Army didn't get their sardines and crackers.

CLARKE: You got some of them?

SABO: Yeah. So anyway, the next day we took the boxes and we flew it up to the Po Valley. And the airport that they had us land on was one that was just recently given up by the Germans. So we landed the plane, and you know, then the British came and took the supplies off. And we're sitting on the wings waiting for further instructions, like maybe, we had to take something back or whatever. And one guy was scratching around with his bayonet into the ground, and all of a sudden he hit the metal -- what? A mine! Was in the airfield! You never saw ten guys run so fast in your life! We ran away from there, we called in the British Sappers, and they came in with their, you know, dug up the mine. I don't know how many there were there, but evidently there were some. And we found one.

CLARKE: Tell me a little about your airplane? How did you feel about her, or him? What was it?

SABO: Her, it's always a her.

CLARKE: Even though it was the Southern Gentleman, or the Virginia Gentlemen, it was a?

SABO: Yeah.

CLARKE: What did, any stories or superstitions, or things that you did before a mission?

SABO: Well, I figured it was pretty air worthy, because you know, it took us on our missions and brought us back, and took us back to the States, and, probably ended up as cigarette lighters or whatever, because I said so long to it when we landed in, I can't remember off hand. But when we landed up in a New England state, and it was...it did the job for us. Yeah.

[UNKNOWN THIRD PERSON: SON?]:

I interject maybe, because you told me that when they saw the plane, not only was it tilted, you know -- one wing was higher than the other, but it was all patched up.

SABO: Yeah, it had patches on it. And what happened, many years afterwards I went to a reunion, and I met the crew chief, the ground crew chief for the Virginia Gentleman. And you know, somehow or other, we got on that conversation. And I told him, I said, "I'm sorry that I didn't make friends with any of the ground crew members." And he said, "You know" he said, "I didn't want to make friends with or get to know those fellows that, well..." he said, if they didn't come back, you know, it would be just too horrendous for them. But what he did, and I'm glad he did, he went through his old Brownie negatives, you know what a brownie camera is? And he found the negatives of the Virginia Gentleman. So, he had them printed up, and he sent them to me.

CLARKE: If you have pictures from this time in your life, and you want to sew them to this, when it's on the web-site, you need to send us some digitals, or we can even scan them.

SABO: Yeah

CLARKE: If you want to let us borrow them, we can scan them, and even send you digital images of them if you don't have that yet, we can do that for you, no problem.

SABO: Oh yeah, I probably will. Because.

CLARKE: It's a service we can provide you for sitting down with us and it'll cost you nothing. I'd love to see a picture of the plane. So, I'm jumping around a little bit. First of all, you just did a great job telling me that story of missions, thank you

very much. That is, uh, for that kid, whoever he is down the road, or that young woman, you just did a really good synopsis of, like, what it is to be a ball gun turret guy in World War II. And so thank you very much for going back in time a little bit in our conversation. That's why I wanted to do that, after we'd had the conversation, have you summarized it... did you lose anybody on your plane, from shrapnel or flak coming through the plane? Or did you guys always get back?

SABO: Oh, yeah, but what happened, like I told you, navigator completed his thirty-five missions. I was next in line, I had twenty-nine, the tail gunner had twenty-three, probably the pilot had twenty-three or twenty-four...the bombardier probably had sixteen. So that means that the navigator flew with other crews, and me with twenty-nine, I flew with other crews. So on this one mission that we went on, we went over the target, and all of a sudden, the tail gunner, "I'm hit! I'm hit! I'm hit!" and the voice faded out. And, now this is, I took the place of the ball turret gunner because he had the flu. So one of the waist gunners said, "I'm going back to get him" and there was some confusion there, I told the pilot, I said, "I'm the ball turret gunner, I'll keep an eye out for any Jerries coming up from the bottom here," because everybody else in the plane was pretty excited like that. So they drag this fellow back to the mid-ship. And what had happened, a piece of flak that was as big as your little finger had gone through the plane, and gone through his clothing, and struck him in the buttocks [laughs]! So, there wasn't much blood! But it had made us all excited [laughs]! It made me a hero, because I said, "I'll keep an eye on the rest of the plane" [laughs]! And, in retrospect, the tail gunner got ten points for his wound and a purple heart [laughs]!

CLARKE: Did he get to keep the piece of shrapnel?

SABO: I think so! Oh yeah, because they pulled it out of his behind! It was, that was the closest, and beside that, the shell going through the wing.

CLARKE: So, would you describe what your ribbons are for on your hat? And just hold it so the camera can see it.

SABO: Yeah. Okay. This is the African-Mediterranean-European Medal with the five stars, and they make them silver then. This is the Good Conduct Medal.

CLARKE: Tell me what the stars are for?

SABO: Those are for the different battles, like the Battle of the Apennines, the Battle for Southern Europe, and a couple other battles, I don't recall. And then this is the Good Conduct Medal. Now that was worth ten points on your discharge. Because if you got a certain number of points, you could get discharged out of the Army. Now this was after the war was over, so I think that it probably started off at a hundred, and then it kept going down like that. But for each battle star, I think you got five points. This is the Air Medal, with two oak leaf clusters. One fell off. But that was for like ten missions, twenty missions, and then this would be for the balance. And then this is the American Victory Medal, and the World War II Medal. And then, of course, these are the wings, from the Air Force. And it shows a bomb with the wings on it going down.

CLARKE: You mentioned on coming home you learned about a couple of guys you went to Lane Tech with, who didn't come home. How did you find out about that?

SABO: Well, actually what I did, I wrote the Washington, and what happened, the fellow that I went into basic training, he and I were, of course, very good friends at Lane, he and I signed up for the Air Force together. We both went in together, we both went to Ft. Sheridan at the same time, and we both went to Miami Beach for our basic training. Now what had happened at that time, he had told me, because the B-29s were the new bomber, and he said, "Oh," he says, "Let's get into the B-29s! There's a new bomber, let's get the war over with in a hurry" And I said, "No, no, no, I want to get some other training. They're not going to make me a pilot, maybe, I can become a radio man!" But when I went to the officer, and he says, "What do you want to do?" and I said, "I want to go to Radio School". And he said, "Well, why do you want to go to Radio School?" and I said, "At least I'd learn a trade and be able to get a job after the war!" He decided I'd be a better gunner! But anyway, my friend went into the B-29s. And he had a longer training period. But the B-29, I think, had a flaw. It had a double-radial engine on it. And one of the problems with it, one of the cylinders would probably heat up, seize up like that, and a lot of them went down because of that reason. But what happened, they were in the Pacific, and he had been flying, probably, just a few bombing missions like that, and all of a sudden, they were in formation, and going somewhere, I don't know where they exactly were going. But anyway, the lead plane, the second lead plane turned back. And they were going up into position like that, and all of a sudden, their engine caught fire, and they dropped out of the formation that they were in, and one of the planes branched off from the formation to follow them down, and all that happened, there was an oil slick in the ocean and signs of debris. There was a life

raft that had opened up, but there were no survivors. He was finished. And, of course, the other fellow, Andy Namath, he was my very good friend too. And he was a little bit older than us, so he had gone into the service sooner, and he was in the Ardennes Forest. And he said that he was on guard duty, and there was a fellow that came up to relieve him like that, and both of them saw this German tank which was probably about a quarter of a mile away. And usually a tank wouldn't bother with a shell on a soldier if they saw him, they'd be looking for some kind of a bigger target, but anyway. This German shot that 88 off the tank and it hit a tree behind him. And all the shrapnel -- it killed the guy that was relieving Andy, and Andy was, he had like, half his knuckle shot off. His heart was turned like forty-five degree angle like that, and it severed the nerve in his leg, and he had all kinds of pieces of metal in him. But, we were nineteen years old, and they didn't even try to operate on him. They just patched him up. And he healed. But, he was a cripple. He was in pain. He had to get along with these elbow crutches, and he lived about ten years after that. He got married, he married his nurse, and had a daughter, but that was the end of it. So, so I lost my two best friends. And...but, life goes on. No matter what happens.

CLARKE: I can see you've been involved with the VFW a couple times here and there?

SABO: Right, right. I, well we had the VFW right close to where we lived, so we were there quite often. And once in a while, I got interviewed. Like yesterday, by a 6th grader, so. A deaf little boy! But he could read lips! And then he had questions to ask, just like you?

CLARKE: Is that how you connected with him, through the VFW?

SABO: Yeah, one of the fellows said, "I'll pick you up and take you to the Post and you'll get interviewed."

CLARKE: What do you think the VFW does for veterans?

SABO: Oh I think they do a terrific job. I'm a constant user of their facilities. Well, I shouldn't say the VFW, I mean the VA. And of course the VFW promotes that. And of course, things for the area and for the neighborhood, all different kinds of charities and things of that sort. So I would rate them very high, both the VA and the VFW.

CLARKE: Your generation is getting thinner and thinner?

SABO: Right, and I think probably the last of them...

CLARKE: Well, what's your advice to those of us who are in the generation after you? What are you..

SABO: I advise them to brush their teeth! Because I hate false teeth! And, of course, smoking...I wasn't really a heavy smoker, but I did smoke. And finally, my fourteen year-old daughter, this was many years ago, in fact, thirty-five years ago, she said, "Dad, I know you're going out in the garage to smoke a cigarette." I said, "By golly, she's right!" and I'm not gonna leave a fourteen year-old tell me what to do. So, I quit.

CLARKE: What advice from your generation do you think you'd want to impart to America?

SABO: Well, in my case it changed my life completely. I must have gone through a metamorphosis of some sort, because I promised myself I would never kill another living creature, if I could help it, mosquitos excluded. And stay out of war, and probably not try and be the leader or have anybody follow our system, because even Russia, where we considered them as a common enemy for years and years, like that, they collapsed they finally collapsed. But I don't know, maybe Putin is putting it back on the map again, I don't know.

CLARKE: So in all of your military service, what are you most proud of, about your service? You're in the military, you've heard of the "I love me wall", right? What are you most proud of?

SABO: Well, I guess that my family turned out okay. I don't know if I had any influence on them, probably their mother did more than me, but they all were good children. That's what you hope for, I guess. I don't know if that's very profound or not.

CLARKE: This isn't about profound this is about you. Is there anything that I didn't cover, that you wish I had asked you?

SABO: I don't think so. I think this is probably on the internet, there's the story of us going overseas and coming back which is a little more detailed, but, it'd be under Walter Sabo Service Man, the 301st Bomb Group.

CLARKE: That was your publication, the thing you published? Or wrote or whatever it is?

SABO: Well, I really didn't' publish it, what I did, I turned it in at a reunion, and somebody from the crew, I think it was a navigator's daughter, put it up like that, and she also included a picture of the crew and of the plane. So I guess, you

know, you think back and you say, “You know, the plane did you well.” It got us through. And of course, I don’t know if my prayers did, probably other people on the crew prayed too, I don’t know. That you don’t find out. I just know what I did. I crossed myself and said a prayer, we’d fly into the flak field.

CLARKE: I want to thank you for sitting down with me, we’ve talked for two hours!

SABO: Wow!

CLARKE: I know. It went pretty fast, didn’t it? Thank you so much and thank you for bringing him down, and thanks for being a part of this institution, very much appreciate it.

SABO: Right!

UNKNOWN THIRD PERSON: He did have that one story he didn’t mention about the bottle of brandy, he eventually took home, right? Or maybe not the brandy...?

SABO: Oh! Well, what happened, on our way back, no on our way down to Lucera, we had to make a stop in the Azores Islands. So I’m in the ball turret, you know I’m looking down at this beautiful, green, lush island in the middle of this blue Atlantic Ocean. And I look on the shore, there’s a steamer that’s capsized, it’s on its side. I don’t know how long it was there. But anyway, when we landed, we said, “When I came in like that, we saw this plane down, we saw this ship down there?” And the guy said, “Oh, yeah!” he said what happened, “This ship was loaded with five star Portuguese brandy, and it went ashore and the local government has it up for sale!” So we had won money from our flight crew, you know, for proficiency or whatever, and the pilot, he said, “How about if I buy a couple of cases of that and we’ll split it?” So he did that. We bought two bottles. One bottle I took a sip out of- oh, and that leads to another story, ha! But anyway, one bottle I said, “I’m going to keep until the end of my tour.” I was an optimist, you know, I was going to end it up. But anyway, the other bottle which had the sip taken out of it, when I got to this base in Lucera, it was a cold and dreary and rainy November night, and they were having a going away party for one of the crew members that was in that tent, and whose bunk I was going to take over. And they were drinking this awful Italian liquor, you know, with the penciled in, inked in labels on it, you know? They were adding grapefruit juice and a little bit of the Italian whiskey, and I had my bottle of brandy. And I said, “Fellows, here’s for the party!” One guy was plunking away on the guitar, and the other guy was singing a sad song with the guitarist, one guy was on his bunk that was crying because somebody saw his wife out at a dance you know with

somebody else. But you know, when I offered this bottle, things livened up. And I was in with them. So it came in handy.

CLARKE: You said that it triggered another story. Do you want to tell it?

SABO: Well, that was it.

CLARKE: Oh, that was the whole story? Got it.

SABO: Because you know, you couldn't be more despondent to come into this tent, with it raining and dark at night,

CLARKE: With the crying?

SABO: And one guy's unconscious, drank too much, one guy is sobbing, the other guy is plunking away on a guitar -- what a going away party!

CLARKE: Jeeze! Well, did he tell any stories that you hadn't really heard before? Is he consistent with his story?

Unkown third person: Yeah well, a lot of the stories I heard before. But there was a lot of the little details that, you know, I hadn't heard about before. So that was very interesting. I was glad I sat in. Thank you for letting be in here.

CLARKE: Oh yeah. No problem, you were a good copilot. He did his job, he sat there quietly.

Unkown third person: I was wondering what you were thinking, "Oh gee. How often is he going to interrupt?" I'm pretty proud...

CLARKE: I would have kicked you eventually.

END: [2:17:??]