

William Nielly Crawford, III

I= Judy Garry

V= William

(000) I: This is Judy Garry with the Veteran's History Project. I'm with William Nielly Crawford in Black Mountain, North Carolina. The date today is the 23rd of April, 2003

OK, Mr. Nielly - let's get a read on your voice..

V: Mr. Crawford

I: I'm sorry, Mr. Crawford.

V: And I'm the third. My father and his father were William Nielly Crawford also.

I: Ok, so it's William Nielly Crawford III and it's April the 23rd, 2003.

(008) I: OK. What branch of the service were you in?

V: I was in the Army in the Air Corps.

I: And were you drafted or did you enlist.

V: No. I enlisted.

I: Where were you living at the time?

V: Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

I: And why did you enlist?

V: Because of our being attacked by the Japanese.. Patriotism, I guess you could say.

I: And you picked the branch of the service you joined for any special reason?

V: Well, I'd already had several courses in celestial navigation so that sort of fit in with the Army Air Corps' (AAC) requirements for a navigator.

(013) I: Do you recall your first days in the service?

V: Oh yes. I rode on a troop train from Pittsburg to Miami Beach pulled by a steam locomotive. Someone broke out a window and we had that smoke coming in all the way down. So when we got to Miami Beach, most of us just threw our clothes away or sent them home.

I: Were you relieved to be off the train or sad to be away from home, how did you feel? V: Yeah, we were pretty busy, and I had not been away from home too much before I went in. But, I don't recall being homesick except on my birthday when I hadn't heard from my folks. I: Tell me about your boot camp experience.

V: Well, we didn't have a very vigorous training in the AAC. But I do recall PT and close order drill and that sort of thing. Yet we were in Miami Beach, which is pretty plush-posh, I guess I should say. (Laugh)

I: Do you remember your instructors?

V: Yes, I remember very distinctly the drill sergeant was only a corporate, but we called him 'sergeant'. His name was 'Rivers' and he would say "I am Corporal Wivers" (laugh)

I: A little bit of a speech impediment. And how did you get through boot camp?

025 (TRAINING)

V: Oh, well, as I say it wasn't very vigorous so...I guess one of the things I do remember is when we got all of our shots, and some of the fellows fainted in the hot sun. But sore arms, you know.

I: You served in which war?

V: This was World War II.

I: And where exactly did you go?

V: Well, I went from basic training to college at Danville, Kentucky for three months. Then to preflight school in Montgomery, Alabama for three months. Then to aerial gunnery school down in Appalachiecola, Florida and Kendall Field before going to bombardier school. They classified me to be a bombardier although I'd already had courses in navigation before I went into the service.

I: Ok, so you were just getting educated, going to training all over the place.

V: That's right.

I: And what was your job assignment?

V: Well, after bombardier school then they sent us to navigation school and we trained as bombardier navigators and we flew on A-26's. We were assigned to Lake Charles Army Air Base in Louisiana. And, uh, we were training to do night pathfinder missions with A26's at low level to drop marker bombs over Japan. Then the B29 would drop their bombs on those marker bombs.

I: And did you see combat?

V: No.

I: So, in your particular unit, there would have been no casualties.

V: No, other than some of our graduates died in plane wrecks after they'd graduated from bombardier and or navigator school. 'Cause we were only 19, 20 years old. And one of the planes flew into North Carolina and few into a mountain up there and killed some of the fellows I knew.

(044) I: Tell me about some of your most memorable experiences.

V: Well, I remember very distinctly in Lake Charles, Louisiana some of the planes coming in after flying low over the Gulf at very low levels with a goose up in the nose. Then when we would go cross country, the planes would be so low that we would have to pick up to go over the railroad lines, you know. The telegraph lines would parallel the railroads. And then going home on the week-end in one of those A26's. That was pretty thrilling to see my folks with their big eyes when we landed and took off.

I: Were you awarded any medals or citations?

V: No, Just for being in the service. But no awards while I was in the service. I did get an award for getting the second highest score in preflight school out of a class of 3,500. Another fellow and I tied for the highest score

(056) I: Ok, this next section is going to be about your life in the service. How did you stay in touch with your family?

V: I wrote almost every day to my mother and father in Pittsburgh. I didn't have a sweetheart at the time. It was all with my mother and father. Actually, I was only 18 when I went in.

I: What was the food like?

V: I thought it was very good. We were training to be bombardiers and navigators and then became officers. And so, I'd say it was very good.

I: Did you have plenty of supplies?

V: Well, yes. We were always here in the United States. I do remember one thing. In Lake Charles, LA, we had German POW's waiting on the tables in the Officer's Club and wandering around the airbase doing menial jobs.

I: Did you feel any pressures or stresses?

V: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Cause they would wash out, as they called it, quite a number of the fellows during the training. And so you never knew from one day to the next whether you were going to complete the course and get your wings, for instance. But no combat stresses.

I: Was there anything special you did for good luck?

V: Oh, I don't believe in luck. Just keep your nose clean and the good Lord takes care of you.

I: On your down time, how did all entertain yourselves?

V: Well, it's interesting that generally speaking you'd find someone very much like-minded. You'd take walks and went to the movies and that sort of thing. And visited some of the nearby towns up from Lake Charles. The townspeople would stop us on the street and ask us home for dessert and what have you. So it was pretty nice.

I: Did they bring entertainers in?

V: Not where I was. They would have entertainment at the camp, but it wasn't like USO tours.

I: When you were on leave what did you do?

V: Well, I came home. And again, I'd have a few dates, when I was home. But I remember taking my mother and sister to the Pittsburgh symphony on one of the leaves. I didn't get many leaves during the war with all this intensive training till I got my wings.

I: Other than the various places that you went for your training, where did you travel while you were in the service?

V: Well, we traveled all over to these various bases with navigation training. They call them 'round robins' from one city to the next and navigating. Some of those places were interesting. Like south Louisiana with the Cajun accent, we didn't know if we were across the border or not.

I: Any particular humorous or unusual events in your travels?

V: Well, being 18, you know, you always had someone playing tricks and all that. I don't recall any particularly humorous.

I: What were some of the pranks?

V: Well, short sheeting. One fellow screamed one morning because someone had put a red mouse in his bed, and he said he kicked that thing around all night and in the morning he saw it on the floor.

(090) I: Do you have photographs of your training?

V: Yes.

I: So what did you think of your officers and fellow soldiers?

V: Well, I really don't recall anything that I would recall in the way of adverse feelings about any of the officers. Some of them were strict and others weren't quite as strict. But, all in all, I think they were very fair.

I: You got along with your fellow soldiers?

V: Oh, yes, generally speaking. Of course, you kind of picked your own companions and there were those who you wouldn't particularly want to socialize with. You learned that pretty quickly. In other words, you stayed away from the goof-offs. (Laughter)

(098) I: Do you recall the day your service ended?

V: It was December 10, 1945.

I: And you went in..?

V: November of 1943. So I was in just a little over two years.

I: Where were you when the service ended?

V: Andrews Air Force Base in Washington DC where the president flies in and out of.

I: What did you do in the days and weeks right after the war?

V: Almost immediately I went back to Pitt and finished my engineering education. I'd already had one year before I went in, and I switched my major to petroleum engineering and graduated from University of Pittsburgh as a petroleum engineer.

I: What was your major before you switched?

V: I was in general engineering. And then got married two days after I graduated to Jean who is from Pittsburg. We grew up in the same Methodist Church in Pittsburg. But she's three years younger, so I didn't recognize her till I came out.

I: So was your education supported by the GI Bill?

V: Yes, I went three years on the GI Bill.

(110) I: Did you make any close friendships while you were in the service?

V: I kept up with a few of them. There was a young - another cadet by the name of George Bachman from New York City. On one occasion, we did visit with George and went to see 'Guys and Dolls' and then to Lindy's after the theatre. I've lost track of him. I've tried to run him down since. But every once in awhile I'd see someone on the street I was in the service with.

I: For about how long did you continue the relationship with your...

V: Oh, just 5 or 6 years.

I: Did you join a veteran's organization?

V: I've been a member of the American Legion with Cherokee here in North Carolina.

(119) I: So after the war, you went on to a career in...

V: Petroleum engineering.

I: And did your military experience influence your thinking about the war or about the military in general?

V: You mean as an afterthought? I think it influenced my operation because I was involved with drilling oil in the North Sea in a very harsh environment. I do think that my military training and the discipline I learned were very helpful.

I: What kind of activities does your veteran's organization do?

V: Well, I'm not that involved with the post in Cherokee, but I do bugling for taps. I perform taps for veterans' funerals. I average between 100 and 150 of those a year. So I have 3 or 4 a week quite often.

I: Do you attend any reunions?

V: No. If I'd have been in a combat unit, I probably would. But I have done bugling for a number of other reunions that have met here in Asheville, and I usually wear my uniform. But generally it's after the event with the names of those who have died within the past year or since they last met. I'll blow taps.

I: Did you play the bugle before?

V: I started bugling in the Boy Scouts, and I played the trumpet. I still play the trumpet in church.

I: So, tell me about your wife.

V: Well, Jean, as I say, grew up in Pittsburg and we grew up in the same church. We married and we averaged a move every two years, raised five children and our seventh grandchild is on the way. We've moved all over. We've lived in places like Australia, Scotland, Libya, Venezuela, and Israel. And I've worked in a number of other places. Oh, in London, too.

I: What company were you with?

V: I started with Shell and then went to Chevron and finally ended up as a consulting engineer, mostly on drilling matters. I've worked in places like Sudan and (?) In the neutral zone between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. I've been to Iran and a few other exotic places.

(149) I: How did your service experience affect your life?

V: Well, I think if you've ever been in the service, even if you didn't get into combat, there's something that you've gained that you could gain no other way. And the fact that I never did get into combat has been, I think, one of the driving forces that leads me to doing the funerals and taps for veterans funerals.

I: Were you fearful that you would be in combat?

V: Well, no. You know, a young kid.

I: Were you disappointed:

V: No, I wasn't disappointed. I do feel very strongly about having dropped the atomic bomb. That's probably why I survived. If they hadn't dropped the bomb, I'd have probably been over there in Japan. That low level flying pathfinding work is very hazardous. So I think there would have been a good chance you wouldn't be talking to me now.

I: Anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered in the interview?

V: I can't think of anything. Not having any exotic experiences

(164) [looking at photographs of aircraft]

I: Tell me about the plane again.

V: This is an A26, 4000 horse power. Such a small plane. You had a crew of three. A bomber and navigator up in the nose, and then you had a gunner back here that operated these two remote controls.

I: And where were you?

V: I was up here in the nose. And I do have another picture of the bombsite. And the reason for the big numbers is so that you can identify what group you're in. Otherwise, when you're in a formation, you do have a tendency to get a bit mixed up. As a navigator, these are the sort of instruments we would have used in dead reckoning, celestial navigation...they would have been the instruments.

This is the picture of the north bombsite, which supposedly was the AAC's secret weapon during the war. This is a picture of the bombardier on the bombsite operating it. This is what he's looking at through the bombsite at cross hairs, and there's the target. This is the bombsite looking through the Plexiglas nose of an A26. That's not a fence. That's where the Plexiglas from above and below join. And then these are not related to any of my experience. I just happen to have these pictures prepared for a talk that I've given a couple of times on the northern bomb site.

V: What's the northern bomb site? Tell me about the northern bombsite.

I: Well, the northern bomb site was actually developed by a Dutchman who was educated in Switzerland and right after World War I, in the early 20's, after Jim Billy Mitchell had sunken a battleship to prove that the airplane could sink a battleship, the Navy got very much interested and employed Norden and he worked on the Norden bombsite. It's got gyroscopes in here to stabilize it, and when everything is set properly, your bomb falls from the plane and hits the target taking into account drift and ground speed. This is really an electrical mechanical computer. And it permitted precision bombing to get up to great heights.

I: I see you've got Tom Brokaw's book, "The Greatest Generation" ...

V: Uh-huh.

I: What do you think?

V. Oh, I enjoyed it. I'm reading another book now. It's about the Flying Fortress, and it's written by a man that went into combat and it tells about training and then going overseas. But I'm really just into that. That's a very good book, very well written. He trained on the Memphis Belle before it was put into the museum. But you know Col. Morgan brought it back. And it's interesting that one of the first planes he flew, the B17, was the Memphis Belle.