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### Oral History Interview: Abbott M. Smith Jr.

Abbott M. Smith Jr.

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Huntington, West Virginia 25755

Oral History Gift and Release Agreement

I, Abbott M. Smith, Jr., the undersigned, of Barboursville, County of Cabell, State of West Virginia, grant, convey, and transfer to the University Libraries' Associates, a division of the Marshall University Foundation, Inc., an educational and eleemosynary institution, all present and future copyright interests in and to my testimony recorded on 12<sup>th</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> Nov., 2007. I understand this allows my interview to be used for scholarly purposes; including study, reproduction, and display – notably digital publication on the Internet and/or any new medium(s) that may be developed in the future. By initialing one of the options below, I understand my right to review the recording and transcript and, if so desired, place any restrictions on access to any part or the whole of said recording and/or transcript, before my interview is deposited in the University Archives and Special Collections Department.

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\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) Closed for my lifetime, unless special permission is gained from me or my assigns.

Abbott M Smith Jr  
(Signature - interviewee)

Date: 12-5-07

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Interviewee's home address)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(City, State, Zip Code)

Nancy G Knight  
(Signature - Witness)

Date: 12/5/07

That the horrors and experiences of warfare are life altering must be beyond doubt. The Second World War took Americans from a variety of backgrounds and deposited them all over Europe, North Africa and Asia leaving few if any, even those who could claim a “good war,” untouched or unchanged. This was also a time when Americans did not know each other so well as we might claim to now and relied on stereotypes to make sense of seeming foreignness among different Americans. This oral history project shall seek to determine the manner in which the experiences of West Virginians serving the American Armed Forces in the Second World War may have been different or perceived differently from those of other Americans while trying also to determine how these men and women made and make sense of and give meaning to their war-time experiences within, if it is applicable, a cultural framework.

The interviews, the first of which is being planned, will be conducted as similarly as possible though with such sensitivity as to take into account individual circumstances and willingness to discuss certain issues. There shall be both a standard question bank and list of larger topics and themes to address in each interview. In all cases though, the narrator’s wishes in terms of topics are paramount even, or especially, if they transcend the questions or themes intended to be addressed. The list of themes should show its usefulness in allowing elasticity of interviews, thus interviews will yield not only the information sought but also such additional themes as narrators themselves reveal important. Because it is envisioned that each interview will provide more questions for future interviews, approximately every fifth interview will be a follow up to address

additional ideas either broached by other narrators or such additional topics as the original narrator may have come to find important. Approximately each tenth interview will be a second follow-up.

In all cases the interviewer will use a digital voice recorder for a record of the interview and will provide the narrator with a copy of the recording and transcript of the interview. A copy of each transcript, voice recording (on CD) and stored in an archival quality format (possibly as .ogg files) on a hard disk. The transcripts will be cross-indexed so as to allow future researchers to make the most efficient use of interviews. Ideally, this project will also permit the design of a public history exhibit wherein artifacts spanning a composite adult lifespan of World War II West Virginians to which is attached a computer interface allowing visitors to listen to excerpts from interviews.

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Mr. Abbott M. Smith, Jr.  
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Dear Mr. Smith,

I am a graduate student in the History Department at Marshall University and am taking a course entitled Oral and Local History under Professor Daniel U. Holbrook. On the first day of the semester Dr. Holbrook received an email from Gaylene Miller of the local AARP chapter suggesting that the wealth of your experience, especially your impressive service in the Army Air Corps during World War II, should be recorded and deposited in the University's Special Collections for the benefit of students and other researchers.

I would appreciate the honor of interviewing you if you are willing. I hope very much you will be. I know that what I learned about that struggle from my grandparents gave me a perspective not to be had from any number of the most excellent books and I believe your own experiences would add to that more complete understanding for myself and others.

I remain, sir,

Very truly yours,

Jim Knight

In preparing to interview a group of West Virginia's World War II veterans one must first recognize the multidisciplinary approach required. This is not merely an exercise in oral history but requires a thorough knowledge of military operations and the risks, duties and rolls of each branch of the service in each theater. It requires a knowledge of the culture which sent so many men into arms. To be holistic, a proper interview preparation in this project requires not only preparation on the conduct of the war, military life and the home front but also a measure of individual preparation for each narrator depending upon his own service and the location from which he was inducted as well as practical knowledge of legitimate oral history interview techniques. This statement of preparatory activities is presented in the form of a case study reflecting the efforts undertaken in preparation for interviewing Abbott M. Smith Jr., eighty-nine year old resident of Barboursville, West Virginia and former Army Air Corps bomber pilot who flew twenty-five missions.

Several books aid this interview in different ways. Those dealing with oral history and its proper execution are perhaps the most useful. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* by Valerie Raleigh Yow being invaluable in preparation.<sup>1</sup> Not only proving itself a manual written by a practitioner of the craft, *Recording Oral History* also provides not only advice on to phrase questions put to the narrator but also several hypothetical question banks. These banks, reworded to suit the circumstances of the individual narrator should make for a useful interview.

Although local histories serve to provide great background in the prewar life of a narrator in this project, I have not yet consulted these not knowing with certainty the

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1. Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2d edition), (Lanham, Md.: Altimira Press, 2005).

town in which Mr. Smith grew to manhood. This will form a part of the research as the final interview and transcription process begin.

Other World War II oral history projects are also useful in the preparation. Rutgers University has entered into such a project centered on its own alumni in the war.<sup>2</sup> These are arranged by name, by year of graduation and by branch of service. The transcripts of these interviews, though regrettably not the interviews themselves, are available for on-line viewing and download. These allow a With an eye towards the precise nature of Mr. Smith's service I have begun consulting those of Air Corps pilots both with an eye towards understanding the service from the point of view of those who survived it and developing questions for the interview itself.

With respect to the conduct of the war as Mr. Smith experienced it I am and have been consulting books related to the air war in Europe, especially those with a direct bearing on the experience of pilots. Of these the profitable in terms individual service experiences is *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* which details such matters as selection and training as well as the actual experience of combat.<sup>3</sup> *The Bomber War: The Allied Air Offensive Against Nazi Germany* and *The Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* both provide insights into the role of bomber pilots in winning the war in Europe as well as a general view of common war time experiences. In a similar vein, every soldier, it may be said safely, that every soldier was concerned with individuals at home and their concerns. *While You Were Gone: A*

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2. The Rutgers Oral History Archives: World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, Cold War, [collection on-line] <http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/> (accessed 29, September 2007).

3. Mark K. Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War*. (London: Frank Cass, 1995), Robin Neillands, *The Bomber War: The Allied Air Offensive Against Nazi Germany*, (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 2001).

Report on Wartime Life in the United States provides a nearly contemporary report on the nature of those concerns.<sup>4</sup>

Less quantifiable but valuable in preparation for this interview is my own (thus far unprofessional) experience of World War II veterans. Raised in part by a man who fought in one battle and served through the occupation of Germany (despite several draft deferments) and having been surrounded much of my life by others who served or befriended people whose fathers did I have gained an appreciation for their experiences and practice in the kind of discussion that enriches the interviewer without revisiting unnecessary discomfort of memory to the narrator. These experiences prepared me for the reality that survivors of the conflict find the most meaning in peaceful pursuits during wartime and that these pursuits are a part of wartime experiences.

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4. Jack Goodman [ed.], *While You Were Gone: A Report on Wartime Life in the United States*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946).

Conclusion of First Series of Interviews, World War II Project  
Abbott M. Smith, Jr.  
Report

Initial experience suggests the initial plan of this project is in need of refinement but not of many overt changes from the project proposal. The one major shift required is to make the project itself less reliant on the experiences of West Virginians with World War II service and instead to conduct a series of interviews from the whole population of local World War II veterans locally regardless of birthplace. That said, it is still my belief that it is worth examining whether the experiences of rural Appalachian World War II veterans with an eye towards determining whether their experiences differed from those of others by virtue of birthplace or culture.

The original proposal that the question set be drawn up in the form of an outline with broad themes interspersed with actual questions rather than a more standard list of questions still appears promising. This approach gives the interviewer enough freedom to vary the questions to the circumstances of the interview so long as each theme receives attention. Conversely, this gives the novice interviewer enough freedom so as to allow failure, or at least to demonstrate inadequacy. Though this method should be retained, it should also be refined. The practice of discussing thoughts, feelings and emotions provoked by combat towards the end of the interview should be avoided. On the basis of the first interview it appears as though it is best to intersperse questions involving emotional reflections with the events reflected upon.

The development of a genuine relationship between interviewer and narrator is beneficial, possibly essential, to useful oral history. This, plus the freedom allowed by the question set indicates that the original suggestion of every fifth interview being a second interview session with a previous narrator and every tenth interview being a third session should be fruitful. These interviews should be kept to a maximum of forty-five minutes each with a break of ten minutes if the narrator is willing and able to continue at the close of a forty-five minute period.

Mr. Smith was an especially helpful narrator insofar as his understanding of the interview as a co-construction in which both the narrator and the interviewer profit by the experience and seek certain benefits from it. To this end he requested, before it could be offered, a copy of the question set before the interview took place. In turn he briefly discussed, in a series of telephone conversations, his experiences and went so far as to provide resources relevant to it. This not only fostered the relationship between narrator and interviewer but also gave each an idea of what to expect and even what was expected. Though it may be acknowledged that this approach might cause a different narrator to go out of his way to please the interviewer, I would propose beginning each contact in future with the offer of the question set in use if such offer is also accompanied by the question, "What do you feel I need to know in order to conduct a good interview of you?" This symbiotic sort of approach to preparation should aid in fostering the mutual understanding of the co-construction as it unfolds.

It is unknown at this time how long the project shall continue or how large it may become. It is possible that storage may come to present a problem. For a small project, such as this has been, experience illustrates that equipment might always pose a problem.

For this project to continue I would purchase a digital voice recorder with the capacity to export files to computer audio format, a bifurcated microphone and the necessary software (if needed) to preserve files in both .wav and .aif formats. Each interview would then be preserved on a hard drive, and two compact discs. The first of the disks would be the master, the second for public use. The existence of back up copies on large, external hard drives kept in secure storage should be a benefit to long term preservation of recordings. I do not believe a file server will be necessary. As originally envisioned, copies of transcripts will be prepared in Microsoft Word, indexed and printed on acid free paper for public study. A master index of all interviews, updated at minimum at the close of every fifth interview session, will be processed in the same way. One other publication, a statistical survey of the project narrators addressing such information as wounds, branch of service, nativity, age, place of enlistment ect., will likewise be prepared for those seeking general information on the nature of the project. In keeping with the first interview, transcriptions will be as literal as possible recording any word recognized as a part of the English language with punctuation used to indicate pauses or retracing of words by the narrator.

As the interest in World War II increases it becomes the responsibility of the project to make its collection available. After the conclusion of any unanticipated initial "teething trouble" Marshall University will be asked for server space on which may be posted both transcripts of interviews and audio files for download after the fashion of Rutgers Veteran's Oral History Project or many interviews available for both reading and listening at Documenting the American South hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. On this page there will appear a statement offering their use free to any

non-profit museum finding them useful (with the usual request of credit) as well as guides, both technical and historical to the use of oral histories in museums. This has become standard practice at many excellent museums, including that at Ellis Island, and may be a boon to many small, local affairs staffed by volunteers.

Oral History Interview of Abbott M. Smith, Jr., former Army Air Corps Bombardier

(abstract)

This interview, conducted in two parts in November 2007, focuses on Mr. Smith's war time experiences as a bombardier in the 303<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group, U.S. Army Air Corps and his work helping to test proximity fuses in preparation for the dropping of the atomic bomb over Japan. In this interview Mr. Smith discusses the actual events of his military service, referring frequently to humor as an antidote against combat fatigue. Mr. Smith also discusses medical care, food, accommodations and social life while the 303<sup>rd</sup> was based in Molesworth, England as well as the high losses in this unit. This interview references several comrades of Mr. Smith's. The first half of the interview concludes with a description of a typical bombing mission from beginning to end.

In the second half Mr. Smith discusses his business life with reference to war-time experiences and, in limited form, the range of feelings produced by combat. This part of the interview also addresses the acute recent interest in World War II in an attempt to understand why it is so acute.

Jim Knight (interviewer): One forty-five on the first of November 2007. Jim Knight interviewing Abbott M. Smith, Jr. about his, about his World War II service and other relevant facets of his life. Present also is Hazel Kirschenman, his assistant. We are in his office at his invitation to conduct this interview.

[The interview began with questions about Mr. Smith's early life. An error in the tape recorder caused this part of the interview to be lost. It is addressed again in the second half of the interview. The audible reference to New Bedford, Massachusetts is to Mr. Smith's birthplace and hometown.]

Abbott Smith: ...Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We were federalized and then we were, one of our assignments was to go to Fort Bragg and work with the famous 101st Airborne. We did photographic reconnaissance for this group. At the time we didn't realize it a premier group and after that I went into flying cadets and graduated as a bombardier in '42 and then we were assigned a crew [tape error, see second half of interview].

While we were at Seabring, this is an interesting thing, the B-17 we had was brand new and we were told to take it to Seattle, Washington [tape error]

I can't think of it Ascension, Ascension Island, which is just a dot in the middle of the South Atlantic. We were greeted there by warm, friendly people and I remember a station

where they had 88 mm guns. And the crew of the 88 mm gun offered us the beer, in other words, how hard they were to get down there!

J.K. We have discovered an error with the recording equipment. We lost some minutes of the interview We had to stop. However, we realized it in time and we are beginning again with Ascension Island.

A.M.S. The crew flew from Ascension Island to Africa and to Marrakech and then up to Gibraltar and it was not on our itinerary to stop at Gibraltar but we managed to find something wrong with the aircraft so we could stop at Gibraltar. The reason being we wanted to see Gibraltar so that we could climb the Rock of Gibraltar, which was heavily fortified. And the

The bomber base at Molesworth, After an orientation period I was assigned to fly with Captain Southworth and it was a wonderful training experience. It's like a football game. Everybody has to do their job. Every position, wide receiver, everybody. If they don't, there's failure. And this is where we lost a lot of planes. Our bomb groups didn't fly in a very tight formation. A loose formation meant the fighters would come in and take those planes out. As far as when we weren't flying we had orientation. We were given classes in meteorology and geography and the target areas and the bombardiers, of course, worked on the IP. And I was fortunate with this navigator that we were considered a lead crew. By that, they would assign a pilot to lead the formation and they would assign a pilot to go along as bombardier and navigator. This was an honor and a huge

responsibility but it worked out well because of the experience of the navigator. And the lead crew, the navigator and so on, would fly. But on several occasions we had the commanding officer of the group, Colonel Stevens, and he flew as co-pilot on a mission and the co-pilot of that plane flew in the tail gunner's to assist in keeping this formation together. It was three groups, in other words, there's three squadrons of six S-18s bombers per group and three groups: a high group, a low group and a lead group. And on several missions we were the lead group and it was my fortune to be the bombardier on these flights with this navigator. And it worked out well and we managed to through our twenty-five missions. And it wasn't long after that that they changed it to thirty. [twenty-five missions refers to the number of missions after which bomber crew members were rotated out of combat.] So that we had an extraordinary group. It reminds me of a top flight football team. Everybody has to do their job. The wide receivers, the inside people, the coaches, everybody. And it's a team effort and absolutely zero room for error. In that respect we did very well. Now, to digress, Captain Southworth and I were asked to look, and I'm not going to name the group because of who might hear this, were asked to go and look at another group that was having high losses. The two of us were to go to this other bomb group that was having a terrible time, high losses, to see what was wrong and so the two of us went over. This is kind of extraordinary, a bombardier and a captain, pilot, going in to tell a group what it is doing wrong. But we went in there and it didn't take us long to figure out what the problem was. First of all, the base was in a mess. Parachutes and junk lying all around. There was no semblance of order. And, of course, that fell on to the formation. There was nothing about the base that was conducive to the discipline that's necessary. In the 303<sup>rd</sup> everything was immaculate, period!

Now to change to the before and after, today our bomb group is very strong. We have hundreds of members. And we have three generations of members. For example, our highly recognized ball turret gunner's grandson did a montage that he got together out of the website including my wings which he gave to me. This is a grandson. And this is not unusual to have third generation very interested.

JK: Tell us about that ball turret gunner if you would.

AMS: The ball turret gunner was Sergeant Swink. On one mission his heat suit went out which meant that he was firing those twin fifties in sub zero temperatures. When the mission was safe we pulled him out of the turret and he was recognized by the "Hit Parade" program for his courage. I had another funny incident. We had a bomb stuck one time and we had trouble getting it out so I went into the bomb bay, of course the doors were open. We were virtually in combat conditions but not at altitude. And the, not the turret, the chief engineer on the crew grabbed me by my belt and I hung over the open bomb bay to get the bomb out. So that belt was the only thing between me and a long ride to the ground but that is the kind of thing that they did.

JK: I'd like to go back a bit if we could. You mentioned your time as a cadet being trained for the role you ultimately had. Tell me about that training if you would.

AMS: Well the bombardier training was at Midland, Texas. And we...the training was flight training. We had Cessnas and we went up and we dropped bombs and we were judged for how we did or didn't do and we were judged on our knowledge of the bomb site and of combat conditions. And it was a very strict deal. I was a sergeant. I had been in the service before so I ended up as a cadet first sergeant which was the most authority I ever had in my whole life.

But, I know, there was a social side to all this. Coming back from a mission when we could break radio silence we did two things. First we said, "Take me out coach, I'm tired." And the second thing was to call the base transportation officer and tell him not to forget to pick up our dates in Wapford, which he did.

JK: Where did the expression, "Take me out coach, I'm tired." come from?

AMS: From football.

JK: I mean, I know it's from football but was there a special, was it more on the order of an inside joke unique to--?

AMS: No, it was just...these guys...there's one fellow was a starter for Notre Dame. We had a bunch of athletes. So naturally they would say, you know, conditions are very bad, the natural thing to say is, "Take me out coach, I'm tired." And that is what we'd say

when we could break radio silence. It also broke tension. Everything wasn't button-down tight. If it had been we wouldn't have survived. We had to be relaxed.

[Office telephone ringing]

JK: We've had a brief intermission to allow Mr. Smith to answer the telephone. After all we are in his office and we are back to the interview.

I'd like to ask you about the different planes. You told me earlier you flew B-17s. You also told me about some interesting names that you and your crews gave them as well.

AMS: Well, the one we loved the most was "Vicious Virgin" And we had a lot of success. We flew it as a lead crew. And we got to love the plane. And eventually it had to be repaired because we kind of beat it up in combat. And, to our total disgust, they changed the name. I've forgotten what they changed it to.

HK: "Scarlet Harlot."

AMS: "Scarlet Harlot," was the name it was changed to, in our total disgust.

JK: [clears throat] Excuse me. You mentioned also having joined the National Guard, the air section of the National Guard. What prompted that decision? How did you decide to do that?

AMS: Well, I wanted to get into the service and at the time they had a song, "I'm Going to [inaudible] Mother Dear. And I'd rather be in the Guard rather than anywhere else, it was a premier outfit. We did photographic reconnaissance.

JK: So the war was already well underway?

AMS: Wait a minute. When was Pearl Harbor?

JK: December 1941.

AMS: Well then this was before that. 'Cause I want to talk about... after I was, we were in the Guard outfit and obviously after Pearl Harbor we were federalized. And everywhere we went, this was early on in army instruction, we were cheered. This was right after the war started. Then in my training at Seabring, for example, we flew submarine service. We had depth charges in our B-17s to drop them if we saw something.

JK: How did your family react to your joining the National Guard and then being federalized?

AMS: I just think they took it as a matter of course. I don't remember too much about it. I was in Harrisburg which wasn't, you know, is fairly close to Philadelphia. And so I could still date the same girl. You know, all of that. So...but... on luck, I worked in the photo

section with a Sergeant Brasto. Now, when I got into combat and was leading bombing raids Brasto was in charge of the photo section over there. And I'd call him up and he could get me any pictures I wanted. Pure luck. No way I could have done it any other way. That's the kind of thing. In fact, I have a couple of them. Actually Hazel's seen them. It just, it was a great experience.

JK: Tell me...you mentioned Sergeant Swink and his...the notice he was given for his bravery. Tell me about your other comrades.

AMS: Well, the worst thing that happened was our co-pilot was killed in my arms. It was a 20 millimeter. And...what happened was...the German fighters had 20 millimeters and you could see them firing at us because the wings would light up. You look down and you see these wings, both sides of them, going like this [made blinking gesture with his hands]. He said, you know, "What's that?" "They're shooting at you." It looks nice, you see--baloney! There's six 20 millimeter cannon working you over, you know. But, we were concentrating on what we were supposed to do. And when I was not bombing I was, had been trained on a 50 caliber machine gun which was in the nose. The co-pilot and the navigator had one also so that when we weren't on the run we were defending. Our upper turret, Sergeant Grey had his leg pretty badly shot up and he was in the hospital and I bandaged him up. We had, of course, all kinds of medical supplies right there to bandage people up. And when I was hit in the leg, for example, I didn't notice it until the navigator said, "What's all that blood doing?" And then I was taken care of and when I got back I was taken right to the hospital. As an aside when you come back from a

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bombing mission they had a bunch of ambulances at a certain spot. And you would issue a flare when you're coming down if you had wounded aboard and you go to a certain area and as soon as you open the door the medic's there to take care of everything. And so that this is what would happen. And it happened to us a number of times. And it...we got marvelous care but the thing that you would think about is we've got a bomb group that's three...six...eighteen planes coming in. And some of them are coming in right and some of them are having problems. This is an aside, this is kind of a joke, flying with Captain Southworth one time we got shot up and we couldn't make it back to Molesworth [the English town where the 303<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group was based] so we landed on some airfield in East Anglia and had to spend the night and so on. But when we got back we had a heat plate which was our absolute pride and joy, you know. We had a hard time getting it. When we got back it was gone because we hadn't come back with the group. The presumption was we were lost, you know. So about an hour later it appeared. Mysteriously, the hot plate returned. That's kind of a funny thing that happened. It...there was one other thing. This is kind of an interesting thing. You're having a briefing, see, for a tough mission and a great big wall and then, are you familiar with the projector where the thing...the item is on a flat tape is projected? Well, they didn't always have it just the way we wanted it. So we used to sing, "Move it over." This is...This is under combat conditions. The worst possible time, what, before the mission. They're showing...they had all the stuff up there, the route and everything else, the IP, everything. And then we sang [begins singing], "Move it over, move it over," because they didn't have it right. But that's the way we did. Now we could have said, "What the Hell's going on?" You know,

we could have been mean about it. But we sang, "Move it over." May be we weren't on key. What I'm trying to say is that what it was like.

And everybody was treated equal. Whether it was Clark Gable or Bob Hope or whatever, because of our prestige we got a lot of important people. The queen came for example, came and got her picture taken next to a bomber. And we had... the town did the press coverage, Cronkite being one of them. But he wasn't the only one, we had several. We had a lady correspondent that got sick when she was covering the... was out by the ambulances so that the... that's the way it is, you know. You have to be able to enjoy, otherwise... Now, some people actually banged their heads on the wall, not intentionally, but because of their emotional problems. And they had, you know, they were removed. We had good, very good, medical. Oh, I've got a story on the medical. Most of the pictures of the crew had the medical officer, Major Laird. He loved to be in crew pictures. So he'd come up when they were taking the pictures and stand, you know, right in with everybody else. And you can't, you couldn't tell him from anybody else. But that was one of the things he liked to do. And I've got one other comment on Major Laird. He and I had a problem. He thought I was great for another ten missions or so. It was an opinion not shared with me. And I sort of told him so. Not the way I'm talking to you. But another one of those lucky things.

Another lucky thing was I wanted to go to Wright Field and didn't have an engineering degree so they sent me to Aberdeen and how did they do that? The operator [inaudible] from our bomb group was chief for air craft personnel so when I walked in there he said,

“Abbott, where do you want to go?” Now, if you had been just, you know, Jim, you’d have probably ended up on a B-29, you know, with a tour up over the Pacific, see. But the luck of having that guy! Oh I, I got another quick thing, I wanted to go to lunch with him. And he said, “Well I...Officers’ mess, you know.” He was a Colonel so he wasn’t going to eat with a second lieutenant. That wasn’t something he was going to do. And he didn’t. But those were side things but extraordinary fortune. And at Aberdeen there was another thing of extraordinary fortune in that I got involved with the atomic bomb because one of the things was the proximity fuse. And the technicians there wanted to check the air burst height. So we, everyday we’d go up and we’d drop dozens of practice bombs, if you will, with proximity fuses and they would check to see when it flashed so that we got, we knew a lot about proximity fuses. And the, of course the atomic bomb had a proximity fuse in it. And then, this, the date, one day they’d call up and they said, “We need the ballistics for the atomic bomb—period.” It was getting ready for the first flight and we couldn’t fly the way we wanted to because the ground people wouldn’t let us. We had to fly a reverse course. Which meant we had this great big bomb hanging out on the wing of a B-17. So, I was concerned about dropping it on Baltimore. So I took along another bombardier whose sole job was to unlock the racks so that we had two of us who knew about that. So the first run the people on the ground said if we drop it we’ll all be killed because unfortunately this bomb was HE [high explosive]. It didn’t have a fuse but it was HE so we tried again and it was still wrong so they called the Ph.D.s at Aberdeen and told them what the problem was and this is, you know, top priority. And they said, “Whose gonna drop it?” And they said, “Captain Smith.” “So let him drop it.” So we went around and with this great big bomb hanging out there and we dropped it and

it landed exactly where it was supposed to. But on the way down whatever time it took for the bomb to get from us to the ground the guys in the tower down on the ground they weren't comfortable. So it turned out that the fuel had been measured wrong. I got another comment there, about these people in the tower down there. I went down one day to watch the bombing and they were dropping HEs and I called, got on the radio and called my guys up there and said, "Hey, listen. I'm down here. I'm down here. Be careful!" It was that terrifying even for somebody professional of it, dropping these. Then just a quick comment. We had a hard stand, a reinforced concrete pad and we would check casings by dropping bombs on a concrete pad. And one time we didn't do too well and the colonel went to look at the crater, see. And he called me on the radio and said, "There's a dozen craters here! Which one was it?" We had been dropping these bombs and missing and had a whole field of misses. And this colonel was after me. And another quick story on that. Right after the atomic bomb we started getting combat pilots back, who couldn't care less, believe me. And one day they had the controls wrong and they dropped a practice bomb that landed on, I think its Route 60. And that guy had every answer, see. So the commanding general called me up and said he wanted a written report in half an hour. And, of course, what actually happened they had energized the circuit so when they opened the bomb bay doors the bomb dropped out. But those were amusing things. Another thing was I was in charge of the bombing in other words, from lowering the bombs to dropping them if we shot up, if we were shooting up tanks I was responsible for the 20 millimeter used, whatever, AP [anti-personnel] rounds we used to shoot up that. And anything that was shot or dropped was my responsibility. Now the people that loaded the bombs were Maryland farmers. And they were forever dropping, rolling the

bombs off the carrier. They would whip the bombs around at the bomb loading site and they roll off and you think its funny but they didn't think so down there. And, so that, my life was not always a happy one. But I enjoyed Aberdeen. I enjoyed working on the atomic bomb and the work they did there and, particularly what we did with the, these proximity fuses which went off in the air. Now if one went off, if we say dropped on a, at say three hundred feet in Ashland it probably would rattle the windows and you'd jump right out of your seat, believe me. Because, Hazel knows all about this, but a five hundred pound bomb blowing up on the air creates a huge amount of impact and noise. So that we, I enjoyed working with those people. They were very dedicated. And we did the job on the atomic bomb. One other comment. Later I was out at Alamogordo or somewhere and I saw the real thing, the real atomic bomb. It looked about exactly like what we were dropping, see. 'Cause they didn't tell us about the configuration except that they were going to use a proximity fuse, which they did.

JK: I'd be interested to know how you, you mentioned earlier that every time your crew came back from a bombing mission the second they did once they broke radio silence was make sure that their dates were all lined up for the night.

AMS: Yeah.

JK: Tell me more about how you, how you and your comrades, how you related to English civilians, in different ways.

AMS: Oh, we used to like to go to London and we had places that we went where the girls were and we got to know them. And, in many cases, married them. And I remember in my case I dated a girl whose landlord called me something Smits. And, so that we would have these deals at the base. As I said before we had a dance band, a very good dance band, in the archives somewhere around here there's a picture of the band, in other words. It was really there. And, so that we had that and, of course, we had all kinds of movies. And the quarters were very nice. I say, they were, they were nice. They were just there. You had a cot and a, may be something to stack a book or something on and the water in the shower wasn't very warm, but that was the least of our worries.

JK: Would you describe, before we begin moving away on to other things in the interview, would you describe a bombing mission from start to finish from the briefing to the return?

[The following exchange refers to a doctor appointment for which Mr. Smith feared he might be late.]

AMS: Okay. Whew! 2:30

HK: It's after 2:30. It's 2:40.

AMS: What time were we supposed, am I supposed to be there?

HK: 3:15

AMS: Okay. What would happen, and this is the truth, we could hear the orderlies walking up to our barracks to wake us up. It was that...and it was usually about five o'clock in the morning. And then we'd assemble, we'd have something to eat. And then we'd have a briefing. And the briefing was for everybody, the whole crew. And they had charts up on the wall, we were given the complete story and then each crew was given, was given the charts and so on to take with them. And the navigators then had their own briefing so that they would absolutely know what was going on. And then we would be called out to the airplanes and we went out in trucks to the airplanes and then we would assemble a formation and then we would determine where in the mission we would be. What position the 303<sup>rd</sup> would be, we could be the high group, the low group, the lead group, whatever. And we were told about that and then we had oxygen masks and tin hats, we had helmets. Sadly, my navigator didn't wear his one day and that was his downfall. Something hit him and he died. I couldn't save him. He was injured in the head but that was how serious it was to wear the helmet. And once we got into the air we assembled and then everybody looked out for fighters, twelve o'clock high. Every body on the plane did that. So we did that and then on the way home we did the same thing until we were well over the U.K. When we reached the ground we were taken to a, where, a debriefing. Where the debriefing was was also a mess hall so we'd get something to eat. And if you were lead crew you got, someone came around on a special, you know, a special...car or whatever to whip you in because the lead crew of course was given a very extensive debriefing which included photos of the, impact photos so that, it

was a...And then, if you were leading a raid, whoever was leading the raid, the bombardier, the strike photos would be on the bulletin board with the bombardier's name under them. So if you missed it was up there too. And after the debriefing, we were pretty much on our own. But it was an extensive debriefing including, usually, a meal. No matter what time we got in there was a meal, a hot meal—period. Three o'clock in the morning, whatever it...they ran a very strict procedure. Now here's an interesting comment, a technical one when Southworth checked me out why he had to follow an indicator in the cock pit. And then, one time we got some engineers from Honeywell to come over and we took a B-17 bomb site up and then they found a way to connect the bomb site to the automatic pilot so that the pilot didn't have to steer, so that the bombardier could steer. Now, you see what the bombardier could do that the pilot couldn't do was that he could do evasive action on the bomb run without compromising the bomb run. So he's the only one that could do that. And so, what I would do is that we'd get this knowledge navigator would get me to the IP and then I'd line up on the target and then I would do evasive action all the way...as much as I could. But the fact that we had it hooked up to the automatic pilot enabled me to do that. Whoever was flying lead with his bomb site, see and this improved things a lot 'cause this meant the pilot could worry about formation and altitude and all these other things. So that these were, were refinements that we had. Of course we had all the photos pictures that we took for evaluation. But it wasn't a happy-go-lucky deal, you went up and dropped your bombs and went off to your date in London. It would be a pretty thorough briefing if you were in the lead crew. All crews were debriefed but the lead crew obviously was given a lot of attention. Critical attention—it wasn't a fun thing like we're sitting here.

## Part II

J.K.: Twenty-ninth of November 2007, at 2:03 p.m. Jim Knight conducting part two of his interview with Abbott M. Smith, Jr. about his World War II experiences.

In the first part of the tape we were missing, due to some tape errors, information about your growing up. I wonder would you go over that for us just briefly?

AS: Well, I from Williams College into the service. I have a...as a private in the 402nd from the 103rd Operations Squadron Harrisburg. That's where my military career started.

JK: But, but prior to that, growing up, childhood, growing up, parents, what experiences there stand out because we were missing that from the first half of the interview.

AS: Well, until I was twelve I lived in New Bedford, Mass. and was very interested in whaling. Had a whaling museum. They had a couple of whalers and actual mock up in the museum and you could get...and actually get into it 'cause the scale was very small. That interest was from the very beginning. My father was interested in whaling and my grandfather had five or six whaling ships that he owned and operated. So I had that interest from him. Then I was, I went to sixth grade New Bedford then we moved, started moving around the country and we ended up in Philadelphia. That's where I lived ever since.

And, my guard experiences were very helpful in that when I became a cadet at Maxwell Field I had military experience. I was a first sergeant, a cadet first sergeant, which is the

most power I ever had in my whole life. There was numbers of cadet squadrons. I called the formations and coordinated all the orders and issued the passes for the cadets and all. The squadron commander did very little but stand up front. The work was done by the first sergeant so that was very helpful. And, it was, it led to--I can't think of it. Oh, Seabring, Florida. And then we were assigned a crew, arbitrarily, there was just nothing to it. We just got an order with a crew on it. And then we were told to go to--is story, consequent, right, consecutive with the tape?

JK: Whatever you want to talk about is important.

AS: From there on is on the tape. In other words we went to Ascension Island. I don't know if it's on the tape or not but the people at Ascension were very friendly, and they offered us some of their booze. Now, bear in mind a liquor store's not handy at Ascension Island. It's about a thousand miles from land in any direction, but that's the way they were. And we were a crew going through there. We were only there a day or two. Then we finally got to England and the extraordinary luck of getting the 303rd Bomb Group. From there on my luck couldn't have been better.

JK: We talked in the first interview a great deal about the actual experiences of air combat. But tell me about the range of emotions that the events you were a part of provoked in you.

AS: Well, we were pretty relaxed. I think I told you that we had a visual and we used to sing, "Move it over!" and that's pretty relaxed, moving the chart of where we were going in Germany. And...but, what hit me was when I started crossing the Channel. I said,

"Whoops! What am I doing here?" Crossing the English Channel at altitude, combat altitude and I can remember every time I got to that spot. "Whoops! What am I doing here?" And after that there was combat so you didn't reflect on anything. And then, as I said before, when we could break radio silence, why we said, "Take me out Coach." That's in the tape too. But, what is important about that is we had high losses and the reason we were able to sustain our well-being, our mental well-being is that we could take it this way. "Move it over!" "Take me out coach. I'm tired." Stuff like that. And if we were otherwise we would not have been able to survive. The losses were ninety percent. So, this is, it's like a football team. You get beat up but you survive and you do your job. And I once told the coach at Marshall, Donovan, that we were the same. That our team was like his very successful football team. Everybody had a job to do and they did it-- Period. And he did. He won a couple of national championships. He did it because everybody knew what to do and did it--Period. And when we had combat they were being beat up by two and three hundred pound guys. That's a very significant part of the background I'd say.

JK: How did, how did the different, I'm trying to think of the right way to frame this question. How did the people you knew, with whom you served, did they all do as well using humor as sort of therapy, like you described or was there a broad range of ways, of ways that people handled the stress of combat?

AS: I think, I think they tried to act as normally as possible. I know its in the tape that the transportation officer brought our dates out. We had a dance band. I've shown you a picture of it--excellant dance band. And you say well, why should they have that? The

losses were very high, ninety percent, so you can't put them in an atmosphere that would make them unable to, you know, continue but then on that very, very high rate.

JK: There's been a lot written also about why men fight. That is, why soldiers in a war fight when they can get out of it one way or another. Based on your experiences, why do men fight? Is it love of country? Love of comrades or is it something else the scholars have missed?

AS: Well, we had, our goal was to provide--do the mission do what we were supposed to do, fly the mission we were supposed to do, do what we were supposed to do and try and succeed in the atmos--the environment and then get out as soon as we could. Everybody was looking forward to getting out but while we were there... It was like doing a job. We didn't talk about flying for the America or anything, there was nothing emotional about it. It was focused on the job. Get in an airplane and do what you were supposed to. And then when you weren't flying, why, you reverted back to your normal way. And this was extraordinary because you couldn't do that if you were on Iwo or something like that. So the losses are higher than anywhere else but there were other compensations.

JK: Now you've...we've talked about your business life and your civic involvement somewhat, informally, between ourselves and you've done very well for yourself, obviously. Are the two related? Is that related to your, your service? Do you feel you learned habits in the army that... of discipline or self-reliance or what have you that helped to cause you to be successful?

AS: It enables you to concentrate. And, to be successful you have to concentrate on what you're doing or supposed to be doing so the service helped in that respect. But, from a very personal standpoint, the fact that I flew combat over Germany as a lead crew and that's pretty much of an internal feeling of good. In other words I, no matter what happened I'm thankful for that experience. Now I've had business successes, too, but we're talking about the war. No matter what you say about patriotism, you know, I rode in the front end of a bomber.

JK: The war, World War II has gained a lot of attention in the last ten years. Band of Brothers was a very high rated series on HBO and is still rebroadcast regularly. Of course, the recent Ken Burns series simply entitled The War about World War II and a host of other movies and other references to the conflict. Why do you think people are, have generally, why do you think people have come to have so much interest, such a passionate attachment to it even if they don't have a direct connection to the conflict?

AS: Well, I'm answering your question with a question. On my screen today there's a documentary on World War II that...promoting the sale, the interest is very high, right now, today. You're talking about some...where are you going to go? A documentary about World War II is being sold on the screen today. I could pull it up for you right now.

JK: Why do you think that is? Why do you think so many people even without a direct connection to it, or any connection, obvious connection gravitate towards World War II as an interest and a study?

AS: Well this is..this is a professional documentation done by professionals and they caught up with us. They're doing that for one reason, what?, to make money. I don't know the answer and frankly I don't know anyone who does. I talked to this friend of mine who ran a submarine and he doesn't know either.

JK: Is there a difference between how it is remembered and how you feel it should be remembered? Is there anything missing from the public memory of World War II?

AS: Absolutely none. What happened was whatever memories I had got reinforced by this 303rd website and Walter Cronkite's documentary *Nine Crying Boys*. You remember, Jim, the tenth one was the one that was killed on the plane. So that this is an award winning documentary of Cronkite's put out in the last month that was extremely kind.

JK: I have one other question I want to ask and it's very rough. How do you feel your experiences, especially given the nature of warfare as you knew it shaped you between then and now. How do you feel that was life altering to you? In what ways did it change you?

AS: Two words--Supreme Confidence.

JK: Tell me more.

AS: That demeanor of confidence has helped me enormously professionally. I'm not from West Virginia but I was on the executive committee of the state chamber. I had another...a number of other things that I did. But I think it's the demeanor of confidence. When I went to work for Logan Corporation the two top men quit. And the president

called. I just came down from Philadelphia and just joined the company and the president called in his executives and said, "Did they work for Abbott Smith?" They said, "Yeah." I think that the confidence that I showed led a top organization to agree to work for someone who just came down from Philadelphia. You ought to know. You're from West Virginia, see. You might say that that was a "no no." Some guy from Philadelphia, you know. That, that's a very accurate description, see.

JK: Tell me what it's like to have that feeling, that feeling of "supreme confidence" that's shaped so much of, of your life since the war.

AS: Well, it's made me a lot easier to cope. That would be a good answer. I was to.... Would you kindly get up and see that big picture of my son up there? Underneath. With, when I was running Logan Corporation that's how I looked. How would you describe me? That's your personal opinion now, Jim. Does that say anything?

JK: That's the picture of a dignified, confident man.

AS: Okay. Any you're trying to be honest here.

JK: [laughter] Absolutely.

AS: We're working on a documentary for you.

JK: I...My last question then. Even, even with our current affair in Iraq most people of my generation have grown up to draft age and through it without, always knowing or at least always believing we're never going to be called up. There's never going to be a

draft. We're never going to get shot at. What do people of my generation need to know about your experiences the most?

AS: How lucky we were--Period. I'm here, here to say it.

JK: Lucky in what ways?

AS: We had the experience we gained from it. And, we just, it just gives us a confidence. And I think there is a difference between those that didn't go in World War II.

JK: What was that difference, as you saw it?

AS: The guys in my lunch bunch, they're all very successful but they're uncomfortable when it gets to talking about what you and I are. If they were sitting here they would be uncomfortable--Period. I've experienced that any number of times in that I don't ever mention it--Period.

JK: Thank you very much for the interview.

AS: Well thank you Jim for experiencing these things with me. Is that on there [points to the tape recorder]?

JK: It's been my pleasure entirely.

AS: I mean you, it got on the tape? [laughter]

JK: It's on there.

AS: Alright.

JK: Thank you again, sir.

## Index

- 101st Airborne Division, 1
- 103rd Operations Squadron, 19
- 303<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group, 4, 17, 20
  - website, 24
- Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Md., 12, 13, 14
- accomodations, 15
- aeirial comabat, described, 9
- Africa, 2
- airplanes, 17
  - “Scarlet Harlot”, 7
  - “Vicious Virgin”, 7
  - B-17, 1, 7, 8, 12, 18
  - B-29, 12
  - German, 9
  - S-18, 3
- Alamogordo, New Mexico, 14
- alcohol, 2, 20
- amament
  - .50 caliber machine gun, 9
- armament
  - .50 caliber machine guns, 4
  - 20 millimeter machine gun, 9
  - 88 mm guns, 2
  - anti-personnel rounds, 14
  - atomic bomb, 12, 13, 14
  - depth charges, 8
  - high explosive bomb, 13
  - practice bombs, 12
  - proximity fuses, 12
- Ascension Island, 2, 20
- automatic pilot, 18
- ball turret gunner, 4
- Baltimore, Maryland, 13
- Band of Brothers television series, 23
- bombardier, 1, 3, 4, 13, 17
- bombing mission described, 18
- Brasto, Sergeant, 8
- Burns, Ken, 23
- business, 22, 25
  - success related to war experiences, 23
- chief engineer, 5
- civilians
  - differences between civilians and veterans, 26
  - English, 15
- co-pilot, 3, 9
- Cronkite, Walter, 11
- dating, 6, 8, 15, 21
- debriefing, 17, 18
- discipline, importance of, 3
- Donovan, Marshall University Football Coach, 21
- English Channel, 20, 21
- entertainment, 15, 22
- equipment
  - helmets, 17
  - oxygen masks, 17
- family
  - father, 19
- fighter planes, German, 17
- food, 16, 17
- football, comparison of war to, 2, 3
- football, comparison to war, 21
- formation, 2, 3
- Fort Bragg, 1
- Gable, Clark, 11
- geography, 3
- Germany, 20
- Gibraltar, 2
- Grey, Sergeant, 9
- Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1, 8, 19
- Hit Parade (radio show), 5
- Hope, Bob, 11
- humor, 6, 10, 11, 20, 21
- Interest in World War II, 4, 24
- Iraq War, 26
- Iwo Jima, 22
- Kirschenman, Hazel, 1, 9, 14
- Laird, Major, 11
- lead crew, 3, 7
- Logan Corporation, 25
- London, England, 18
- losses, 2, 4, 21, 22, 24
- losses, relevance to discipline, 4
- Marrakech, 2

Maxwell Field, 19  
medical care, 9, 10, 11  
meteorology, 3  
Midland, Texas, 5  
Molesworth, England, 2  
National Guard, 7, 8  
navigator, 3, 9, 16, 17, 18  
New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1, 19  
*Nine Crying Boys* (documentary), 24  
orderlies, 16  
Pacific Theater, 12  
patriotism, 22  
Pearl Harbor, 8  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 8, 25  
photographic reconnaissance, 1  
pilot, 3, 4, 18  
Seabring, Florida, 1, 8  
Seattle, Washington, 1  
South Atlantic, 2  
Southworth, Captain, 3, 10, 17  
Stevens, Colonel, 3  
submarines, aerial protection of, 8  
Swink, Sergeant, 4, 9  
The War (television series), 23  
training, 3, 5, 20  
Wapford, England, 6  
website, 303rd Bomb Group, 4  
West Virginia, 25  
whaling, 19  
Williams College, 19  
wound, received by narrator, 10