

**PRESERVING OUR HISTORY:  
ROTARY CLUB OF GREENSBORO**

INTERVIEWEE: Thomas Cochran

INTERVIEWER: Kathelene Smith

DATE: June 27, 2013

KS: My name is Kathelene Smith. It's June 27, 2013, and I am with Mr. Tom Cochran for the Preserving Our History Rotary Club of Greensboro Oral History Project interview. Good morning, Mr. Cochran. How are you this morning?

TC: I'm going to make it, I think.

KS: [laughter] Okay, we'll start with when and where you were born.

TC: I was born in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, on August 25, 1920.

KS: So you have a birthday coming up.

TC: Yes, ninety-four.

KS: That's great. Congratulations. So where did you grow up?

TC: In Big Stone Gap.

KS: Well, tell me a little bit about your family and your home life.

TC: Well, mother, father, brother, sister; sister older, brother younger. My mother was a housewife, and she was brought up by her older sister because her mother was killed in a horse accident when she was ten years old. My father was a mining engineer. He went to Augusta Military Academy. He was in the First World War, and he worked for a coal company all his working days. That's a coal mining section of Virginia, and I was a product of the Depression, but a happy family that didn't know it was going on, really. My father was superintendent of the Sunday school; my mother led the choir. We belonged to the Episcopal Church. I'd been a lifelong Episcopalian until I found out they don't believe what they're supposed to believe, and I'm now in the Anglican Church; have been for seven years. What church do you go to?

KS: I'm an Episcopalian.

TC: Oh, good. Good.

KS: But I do like the Anglican Church. I understand what you mean.

TC: Yes, well, did you know we had a bishop who said Jesus Christ—we no longer teach that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

KS: Really. No, I didn't know that.

TC: Bishop Johnson. That's right. Let's see, my mother taught dancing classes, she loved to dance, and she raised her three children, and we all went to school there in Big Stone Gap. We had a town of five thousand people. We had between two or three hundred in the whole school. I think there were around thirty in the graduating class, and I was ahead of my sister because she got sick somewhere along the way, and I graduated in 1937. We had eleven years of school in the Depression days, and we had one month shy on the end of the school year, so we had to cram a lot into a short time, but I really loved school. I enjoyed the challenge, we had good teachers, and my favorite subjects were math and science, and, strangely enough, I liked Latin. I finished third in the class with a ninety-three average; beaten out by two girls who did nothing but go to school, and I played football, basketball, and all of those things. I guess that just about covers the younger years.

KS: So you said you really liked sports in school.

TC: Yes.

KS: Any other thing from your childhood you'd like to talk about; any fun experiences? What did you like to do with your brothers and sisters?

TC: Well, my mother taught us all to play bridge, and she loved to play games with us. Monopoly had just come out in those days, and we played—what do they call it—Michigan.

KS: Michigan?

TC: Yes. And so she was always game to take on our friends, and included them in those things. I was a Boy Scout. I went to Boy Scout meetings, and scout camps, my father was assistant scout master, and he was also a volunteer fireman.

KS: Really?

TC: Small town. But we were what you'd call "church people."

KS: Was most of your social outlet with the church, too.

TC: I'd say so. There wasn't a whole lot of that in those days. The Depression was on.

KS: So when did you graduate from high school? What year?

TC: Nineteen thirty-seven.

KS: What did you do next?

TC: I came to Greensboro to work for my uncle's business. My father's sister had this business; I had a UDC scholarship and a promise of a scholarship to VPI. I really wanted to study electrical engineering, but my father couldn't afford to send me to school. I had a rich uncle, and he said he'd send me to school. He was a lawyer; practiced before the Supreme Court, he and his daughter. His law practice was with business and so he was familiar with my father's sister's business, and he told her that he was going to send me to school; she said, "Well, we've got a business with only a daughter, and nobody to take it over. We'd love to have him as our son, living at our house, and learn the business, and take it over." You know those pictures? And so that's what they decided, and asked me if that would suit me; I said, "Well, I can't turn down an opportunity like that."

KS: Sure.

TC: So they said I could go to Guilford College and work at the business, but when I got here, they wanted me to work, and I wanted to take part in the activities of the school, if I went to college. They wanted me to work. Anyhow I worked, and I did everything from packing and shipping to drawing plans and so forth. I took a correspondence course in architectural drawing. I was approaching twenty-one, draft age, and didn't want to wind up a soldier in the trenches so I got a trigonometry book and studied that so I could take the Air Force examinations, which I did. I went to—I think I said in the paper, I went to Charlotte and in one day took the examinations and physical, and was on my way to the Air Force in Montgomery, Alabama.

KS: That was fast!

TC: Yes. So, and you pretty well have the story.

KS: But we'll get it on tape, too. So you went to Alabama, and you were twenty-one years old, and so what did you do? What was it like there?

TC: I was in the Aviation Cadet Corps, the Air Force was a part of the Army in those days. The Air Force became its own in 1947. So I arrived there about five o'clock in the morning, and on that day two thousand new cadets arrived, and they had no place to put us, and hardly knew what to do with us, I wound up in what they called "Tent City" because I was one of the first to get there at five o'clock in the morning and the others they spread all over Alabama in old mills, they called them. You know, they'd been closed, or the space was available; we went through pre-flight a couple of months later, because they couldn't take us in pre-flight school at that time. When we graduated from that, they shipped us to a primary flying school. I went to Arcadia, Florida, and flew one plane there, and then went back to Montgomery, Alabama, for Basic Training at Günter

Field, and flew a couple of different single engine planes there—day and night, flying with instruments.

KS: What field?

TC: G u n t e r. From there I went to Advanced Flying School in Albany, Georgia, and flew a couple of twin-engine planes, graduated, was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army Air Force Reserve. Then I was shipped off to Nashville, Tennessee; actually it was Smyrna, Tennessee, outside of Nashville, to fly B17s, and I was right out of Pilot Training School. The only ones flying B17s in those days were ones that had been in the service a long time, had 1,500 hours. I had around 200 hours entering school—we learned to fly the B17 and all about it, and then I was shipped off to Salt Lake City [Utah] to establish a crew of ten men. I was the tenth, and went to Blythe, California, for what was called Phase One, Combat Training.

KS: Blythe?

TC: Blythe, B l y t h e. That's on the desert, right on the Colorado River, on the east side of California.

KS: Now, so you made your way across the United States. Before then, had you ever been out of Virginia, except for coming to Greensboro?

TC: Oh, let me think. Yes, I had been to Bristol, Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, and Washington, D.C.

KS: So you just made your way across the United States.

TC: Oh, yes. Easily. We were navigators as well as pilots. I took the troop train from Nashville to Blythe, California.

KS: What was that like?

TC: Well, it was right much fun. We played cards, enjoyed the scenery, enjoyed each other. We worked hard and many hours a day, so it was a relief to get on that train and rest a little bit. We got to Blythe with our crew, and trained there for three months, then went to Ainsworth, Nebraska.

KS: So these were all training areas.

TC: Crew training. Then we went to Rapid City, South Dakota. So in June '43, I was ready to go overseas with my crew, and they took us down to Salina, Kansas, where I picked up a new B17F model. They named them as they came up the list, and so we had to fly that plane back to Rapid City, South Dakota, and get it ready to go overseas. We had to calibrate all the instruments and have everything checked out and back to Salina, Kansas. They gave us a week off before going overseas. Salina, Kansas to Greensboro to Big

Stone Gap, Virginia, we had airline passes and made it okay, but we had to be sure we were back on time. On the way back they had a flood on the Mississippi, and that held us up, but they accepted that. Anyhow, we got back to Salina; we took off to fly to Prestwick, Scotland.

KS: Is that where you were going to be based from?

TC: No. This flight to England was the northern route, they called it, and ours was one of the first flights that flew directly from Newfoundland to Scotland. Before that, they'd been flying further north to islands, Iceland and so forth. Let's see, we had three hours of darkness on that flight, and my navigator changed course about every hour because we were flying a great circle chart, we had a beacon on the coast of Ireland that we could tune into, and we had a radio compass that could pick it up, but we couldn't count on that because the Germans were in France, and they could interrupt those signals. They could change those signals, you know, so we had to go by our navigator but we just used that as a checkpoint, and Prestwick was right near Glasgow, Scotland. We were known as "provisional groups." There were twenty-six crews; they sent seven of us down to North Africa. I was one of those seven. The others stayed in England and flew out of there. I flew out of North Africa. So we flew—to get to North Africa, we had to get well away from France on the way down because the Germans were there, and we were ready for combat when we took off from England. We flew way out to sea to avoid France, heading to Marrakesh, Morocco; they sent us on to Algeria. And I started flying my missions out of Algeria.

KS: What was Algeria like in the thirties and forties?

TC: Well, we were out in the desert. We had a little town, a little place called Ain M'lila, about two hundred miles south of Algiers which is on the coast. Our targets then were those that we could reach from that point. They had just run the Germans out of North Africa, so our targets were on Sicily and Sardinia and Corsica—they were northern parts of the Mediterranean—and on the lower part of Italy; my first mission was on Rome: the marshalling, the railroad marshalling yard in Rome, Italy. And you can imagine what a stir that was, bombing Rome with the Vatican and all that.

KS: Sure. I didn't know we bombed Rome.

TC: Yes.

KS: That's amazing. The railroads: that makes sense.

TC: And we had a pretty successful mission because we kept our bombs in the target, and I think my next mission was back, south of Rome—Naples—where we bombed shipping and railroads; we lost some planes on that one. Then we moved up to right outside of Tunis, and from there we bombed all over southern Europe: France, Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia, Austria, Greece—that just about covers it—and then we moved to Foggia in Italy. Foggia was a city where the Germans had seven airdromes. We kept busy bombing

those airdromes before we ran them out of there and got up into Italy. It was in southern Italy, right near the city of Bari which is on the Adriatic Sea, and was the Hollywood of Italy. I finished my missions there on 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1943—fifty missions. I finished them all in five months and ten days. And I got back safely with all my crew, except my bombardier who was sick on our forty-eighth mission. We had to finish up; he flew with another crew; was lost in Yugoslavia; killed on that mission. And that just about wound it up, and then they had a landing going on in those days at Anzio beachhead. Of course, before we went into Italy, we had a landing at Salerno, which was in southern Italy, and we bombed that, too. But when I'd finished my missions, my crew and I were slated to come back to the States for rest and relaxation and reassignment.

KS: Between your missions in Europe, did you get some downtime? Did you get to kind of relax on the base or in Africa or wherever you were? What did you do when you weren't doing missions?

TC: We had a lot going on. We had training missions when we didn't have missions. We had missions that were recalled for some reason or other, which didn't count against the fifty, and we were real busy. I had—let's see, I went to Bari a couple of times, and when we were in North Africa, I went out in the desert to visit the grounds over which the battles were fought; saw the blown-up tanks and all the devastation that took place, so we got to see some of what was going on, but then when it was time to go home—oh, by the way, I flew my plane to its eighty-fifth mission, and I'd hoped to fly it back to the States, but it was shot up right at the end of the missions, and when I was in Algiers waiting for a flight out of there, another crew came through flying it. They had reconditioned it. So we went on to Casablanca, and we had to wait for transportation to get back to the USA, I think we were there about three weeks. We kept our hands over our pockets so the pickpockets wouldn't get us, and saw what we could.[laughs]

KS: What was Casablanca like?

TC: Of course, it was a wartime city, a French city, you know. We had a Red Cross there, and they had entertainment and dancing. We stayed in the Italian Embassy there in Casablanca.

KS: I bet that was beautiful.

TC: It was. So we just lived it up as best we could and caught our ship back home, the USS General Butner, which was 680 feet long and had 3,000 German prisoners on it, maybe a couple hundred of our servicemen. The ship was fast and didn't wait for a convoy, it made the trip alone!

KS: The Germans were being shipped to be in camps here?

TC: Yes, they built the dairy barn next door on Cobles Dairy Farm. Did you know that?

KS: I did know that. As a matter of fact, UNCG had a farm, and we had prisoners of wars working on our farm during that time. So I did know they were in North Carolina.

TC: Where was that farm?

KS: It was around this area. It was kind of where Gallimore Dairy Road is now. It was around the airport, but they sold it after World War II, but there were prisoners of war there.

TC: So when I came into US, landed up at Newport News, and took the railroad down to Fort Bragg for reassignment, and I was given six days leave, and then assigned to Miami Beach. So I proposed to my girlfriend, and we were married.

KS: Now you were so busy, where did you meet a girl? [laughter] When did you have time to do that?

TC: That's true, but Greensboro had a lot of big bands visit Greensboro and dances. The Manor at Sedgefield was—where most of the dances were held; so I met her at one of those dances, and I dated her before I left Greensboro. I kept up with her all the time during the war and she prayed for me, and so I proposed to her; her father agreed, and he said to Joan: "He's a fine young man. He's mighty slow, but damned sure." [laughter]

KS: What a recommendation! [laughter] I want to talk to you a little bit more about getting married, but what was your highest rank you had reached when you were in the military?

TC: Well, I was in the military reserve until 1966 and lieutenant colonel was the highest rank. My highest rank overseas was captain.

KS: And I know you got—you're very well decorated. Can we talk a little about that, too?

TC: Well, it's just a matter of course. The crews flying in England for twenty-five missions got the DFC, Distinguished Flying Cross. And you've heard of the Memphis Belle?

KS: Yes!

TC: Memphis Belle was the first plane to complete twenty-five missions, and didn't lose a crew member, and they were sent back to the states to sell war bonds. Well, everybody that flew twenty-five missions in England got the DFC. In North Africa, we flew fifty missions, and nobody got the DFC. I knew only one person that got a DFC while we were in North Africa. I flew fifty missions, and I brought my crew back, and we were shot all to pieces many times.

KS: Why is that, I wonder?

TC: Oh, I don't know. I had friends that flew over the hump in India who got the DFC, and they were all radio operators.

KS: That's not right.

TC: Well, see, in England, they had gunners, everybody. I don't feel bad toward them; it's just that I felt slighted.

KS: Well, but you got five bronze stars!

TC: We got nine.

KS: Nine bronze stars!

TC: They are oak stars with clusters. That was on the air medal. We got the air medal every five missions, so we'd get the air medal cluster. We'd had the bronze cluster for five more, and a bronze cluster. I had nine of those.

KS: That's wonderful. So you were finally home. You proposed to your girlfriend, Joan, and did you both move to Miami?

TC: Yes, we were down there for three weeks on the beach. Yes, that was great. I was there for rest, relaxation, and reassignment and a mouth full of fillings (21).

KS: Twenty-one!

TC: My teeth just went to pieces while I was overseas. We didn't have any milk. I guess that was it. And I had one wisdom tooth taken out.

KS: That's not much of a trip to Miami!

TC: But they were getting us ready to go back into training and that sort of thing. So when I left there, I was training B17 crews in Tampa, Florida.

KS: So the war still wasn't over. You were still training?

TC: No, that was 1943, when I finished my missions it was 1944. And then we changed over to B29s for the balance of the war. I thought you might be interested in those.

KS: Oh, my goodness!

TC: That's the B17. That's the plane I flew in combat.

KS: I'm going to note for the tape. Mr. Cochran just handed me a book called *Defenders of Liberty: Second Bombardment Group Wing, 1918 to 1993*.

TC: This was a World War I group which operated through World War II and is still operating today. They flew the B52 in Desert Storm.



KS: This is a beautiful book. Oh, this is World War I. That's a little bit earlier.

TC: This is a whole—this part is World War I.

KS: So I'm trying to find something that—Second Bombardment group begins World War II operations. So is that more like what you—

TC: That's a fighter plane.

KS: Oh. [sounds of pages turning]

TC: That's our plane there.

KS: That's your plane!

TC: Not exactly mine, but I'll show you a picture of mine.

KS: Oh, yes. I'd love to see your plane. This is a great book.

TC: If I can find it. [pages turning] I keep telling myself I'm going to write this down so I can find it. [pause] Would you like to get a glass of water or something?

KS: No, I'm fine. I love books like this.

TC: That's a B17, G model, which entered the war in 1943 just as I was completing my missions. It had a nose turret with two 50 cal. Guns. The B17 F needed more fire power up front.

KS: That's huge. That is enormous. Well, bombers are usually bigger, aren't they?

TC: That's my first plane right there, Zelma, 082. This is a picture of my flight crew with the plane. Crew members are shown at their stations on the plane. This is Zelma, and this is briefing at the plane before we took off.

KS: And these little marks next to the plane are how many people—how many planes you brought down?

TC: No, those are bombing missions.

KS: Oh, those are bombing missions!

TC: And these are planes it brought down, and we had submarines that we got.

KS: Submarines, too. That's amazing! And here you are!

TC: Yes. That's my navigator; these are my two waist gunners; my radio operator; my engineer.

KS: So how long did these missions take from the time you took off to the time you got back?

TC: Most of them were in the range of seven or eight hours, and we had as much as thirteen hours.

KS: Did you have to refuel for a thirteen hour mission?

TC: No. Didn't do anything like that in those days. Let me see if I can find a list of my missions somewhere. [pause, pages turning] Those are my missions. The times are in there. Those shorter times are from flying new engines or reconditioned engines called slow timing. We had to get time flying on them before we could combat them.

KS: This is amazing. So this is a list of your missions between July of '43 and October of '43, and then it goes on to December of '43.

TC: December 30<sup>th</sup> is the last one. [pages turning] Oh, I haven't found my plane yet. Bob Hope and Frances Langford visited.

KS: Oh, you saw Bob Hope and Frances Langford? That's wonderful.

TC: Here they are.

KS: Where did you see them?

TC: In North Africa.

KS: She was beautiful. Was it a casual show, just like this? Oh, wow. That's it.

TC: Yes.

KS: That's a huge crowd.

TC: That's our bomb group. There are our bathing facilities. This was an oil drum and we rigged it up with a pump that we used on a B17 to transfer gas from one tank to another, to pump water up there in the hot sunshine. It warmed up the water in the tank. [laughter]

KS: Goodness.

TC: That's my ball turret operator.

KS: And he's got himself a little—looks like a little burro there to ride.

TC: And let's see. [pages turning] These are pictures that we took. This is my first mission, right here, on Rome. We had cameras in the plane that took pictures of the bombing.

KS: Oh, is that—there's the coliseum.

TC: Yes.

KS: That's so interesting. And there's the railroad. You can see the railroad tracks.

TC: And this is railroad right here. This is where we were bombing mainly, right in there.

KS: Yes, you got that railroad.

TC: I hope I'm not taking too much time.

KS: No, no, this is great. It must be wonderful to have a book with all your missions in it. I mean, this is a great resource.

TC: Every mission is in here. We had a policy in our group that when a new crew came in, we took the copilot off of an experienced crew and put him on as first pilot for a few missions, and then my co-pilot would go with his crew for his time, and that was worth all of the training we had getting ready to go over, with that two missions we had with experienced pilots. Each mission is listed in here: what it covered, the time it took, and all that sort of thing. [pages turning] This was my squadron commander right here, and he was the group commander on my last mission. I flew copilot with him since he chose my crew to fly with.

KS: Did you keep up with any of these guys after the war?

TC: I'm ninety-three, almost ninety-four. There aren't many of us left.

KS: But when you—when you came back, did you all keep up when you came back?

TC: We had group reunions, and I attended about five or six of them, I guess. But they dwindled off, and of course, our losses—only thirty percent came home.

KS: Really!

TC: Yes.

KS: That must have been really hard for you all. Thirty percent came home; I had no idea.

TC: [pages turning] I should know this book by heart, but I don't. Here's a map of Tunisia. We were up here, right outside of Tunis in North Africa. We were back here in Algiers before we moved to Tunis. [pages turning]. Ah, there we are. Thundermug. Now this crew flew it fifty missions, then turned it over to me.

KS: So these are the missions. What are these little swastikas represent?

TC: Those are bombing missions, and these are fighters shot down. I flew (#604) thirty-five missions. Let's see what it says. Page 182, I flew thirty-five missions. [pages turning] There's what it looked like when I finished flying it. Look at all the missions we flew.

KS: That's impressive. It says, "Lieutenant Thomas Cochran and crew flew the airplane to its eighty-fifth mission. Thundermug completed its hundredth mission April 13, 1944."

TC: Well, happy day.

KS: That was amazing.

TC: There's a whole lot in here.

KS: That's a great book.

TC: Let's see, these are the articles that were in the newspaper. You know that information that you have. Would you like one of these?

KS: Oh, sure. Do you have an extra one?

TC: Now let's see. I think you've got it all right there and the newspaper was finished on one page, and that's it right there.

KS: Are you sure you have another one? Do you want the original, and you want to give me the copy? Or which one do you want?

TC: I'll give you this one then. And that's the last on the back.

KS: Oh, great! So this is from the News & Record, dated November 29, 2009; an article that's entitled "Pilot's Maneuver Saves Bomber Crew." This is all about you! In fifty combat missions as bomber pilot, my goodness.

TC: There were two long articles in two different papers: first, one week; and then the next.

KS: So what maneuver are they talking about in these articles?

TC: You need to understand a little about the flying of missions. Bombers flew in Group Formation, designed to get maximum protection from every fighter; usually three squadrons of six planes each (it may be four sqdns), often seven planes in a sqdn. There was a head sqdn with sqdns two and three on either side stacked away from the sun. Fighters made their attack from high on the sun side and couldn't be seen by the bombers on the low side, but became a target for planes on the high side that could see them. However, on the Bomb Run, it was necessary to bomb in trail—that is the sqdns would

fall back and below the lead in line, cut power and slow down. Then race to catch up. After the bomb drop, the return heading was predetermined and on the decline—much easier for the planes to regroup.

[End CD 1—Begin CD 2]

TC: So, on that mission, it was to bomb Foggia military air fields. We had a light bomb load of fragmentation bombs. We usually carried six thousand pounds of bombs, of heavy bombs, and fragmentations were kind of like hand grenades, only they weighed a hundred and twenty pounds apiece. It was a lighter load. The group is lead to a known point on the ground which they can navigate to, and while they're flying out, the navigator checks the drift, and checks for the air temperature, and all those things that affect dropping of the bombs. They fly to the initial point, and then turn to the bomb run heading. And in turning, that puts one squadron on the inside of the turn, so they had to drop back and also had to get in trail. So I was caught on the inside of the turn. We had to slow down to move over and turn, and when I put the power back on, one engine just didn't have it. I became a sitting duck there, you know. Everyone else went off and left me. We had two groups flying, and I knew that the first group was going to come off the target heading toward me. We were here going in, they were coming back, so it dawned on me if I could get underneath them—fly underneath them—I could shield myself from the fighters, which we did; the thing that really saved us was my gunners. The first attack of fighters—there must have been fifteen or more in the area—came in from the rear, high in the rear, and my gunner shot down the two leaders. There were four that came in, and I think that kept them from bearing down on us so. All their attacks were from the rear. They would press the attack firing as they came in, then pull up and away. We got four fighters, my crew did. I salvoed the bombs, pulled the lever and dropped all the bombs, and that lessened the load but it increased the drag because the bomb bay doors were open. But there were no bombs there to be blown up on us, so I turned and shielded with the group. We were out about ten minutes by ourselves, then shielded ourselves, and our group got seven fighters that day, counting the four that we got.

KS: That's amazing.

TC: And we didn't have fighter escorts because the fighters didn't have the range. We'd have a group of fighters that would fly out with us to about thirty minutes of the target, and another group would pick us up about thirty minutes off the target, so, you know, most of the fuss was over by then. So I don't know what else I can tell you. Oh, my plane had a twenty millimeter shell that went through the leading edge of the wing and knocked out a section of the wing like that, and the same thing on the horizontal stabilizer, and something had hit one of the props and just splattered on it. It must have been a machine gun shell. And that was about all the damage we had except flak but we didn't really get any flak on that flight. And when I caught up with the group, they were descending. After we left the target, we descended—got to a lower altitude—and I was able to keep up because we were going down. Now what happened, we found out when we got on the ground. Every engine has an intake manifold where the air comes into the engine and

picks up the gas and takes it to the cylinders. Well, on high altitude planes, we had super chargers, which were around here. They were run by the exhaust from the engine to compress the air so it would hold the fuel to take it to the cylinders, and what had happened, the intake manifold on that engine had come loose, so what the super chargers were producing was just going out into the space and not into the engine. When we got down to ten thousand feet where it could operate normally without super chargers—it picked up.

KS: That's amazing. My goodness.

TC: Yes. Well, let's see. I showed you the plane, didn't I. I showed you the crew, and all the rest of this is each mission, and I've labeled all my missions and what they were. That was that G model, you see, with this—has a turret in the front.

KS: That's a huge plane.

TC: There were two fifty-caliber machine guns in the turret. I did not fly this plane. We had about six thousand of those in the war, and we had guns up on the sides. Here the bombardier and the navigator are at the front, and you can see them. But that weak point of the flying fortress we called the B17, was the defensive power—at the front of the plane. The Germans found they could come in to the front of the planes and peel off, and they wouldn't have to go through as much gunfire. Of course if the plane is in formation, they had the others to contend with. See what I mean?

KS: Yes.

TC: And so I think the word was out that we had a new bomber that was a gunship, and the Germans probably had that in their mind when I was out there alone, because it was about the time the G models were beginning to come in. So they probably kept their distance.

KS: That's an amazing plane.

[pause, turning pages]

TC: Look at all the missions on that plane.

KS: Wow!

TC: Most of them didn't make it though.

KS: I had no idea that only thirty percent came back. Those are amazing statistics.

TC: Yes.

KS: So then you came back to Miami with your bride, and you started to train others.

TC: We spent three weeks there on Miami Beach, and then we were assigned to McDill field in Tampa, Florida, where we trained B17 crews. I was operations officer there.

KS: So then what happened when you were training? You trained for awhile.

TC: Well, McDill had been a B26 base when we went in with B17s, and—I'm telling you just because it's funny—the B26 was a medium bomber, twin-engine, high-wing loading. It was fast, and they had a saying at McDill when we went there, "One a day in Tampa Bay." [laughter] But anyhow, the B26 did a good job through the whole war. We had a B26 outfit off our runway in Tunis, about five miles away, and sometimes they would come over just barely making it, with an engine out, you know, and land. So we trained B17 crews there, and then we changed over to B29s and trained B29s until the end of the war. I went up to Maxwell Field; we went through a transition period with the B29s. I'll see if I—I thought I had another picture of a B29 here I could show you. [pause] Oh, here we go. That's a B15. [pages turning]

KS: This is a little pamphlet that—I'm just saying this for our taped record—a B17 Flying Fortress. So they were made by Boeing.

TC: Yes. That's a B29.

KS: And here's a little pamphlet on Boeing's B29 Super Fortress. Wow. Those are impressive planes.

TC: See, this is the plane they built to fly in the Pacific so they could reach Japan, but they had to take all those hours to get a base to fly them out of there, you know. They just have one more of these flying now. The original Memphis Belle is at Wright-Patterson Field now. They're going to redo it and put it on display, but there was a plane that was labeled the Memphis Belle for the movie, and a friend of mine has a friend who is part-owner of that plane, and it would come around. It was in Winston-Salem not too long ago, taking up passengers for four hundred and twenty-five dollars a ride. And he comes into Concord occasionally. I don't know whether that's his home or what, but this friend of mine is going to take me down there when he brings it in and let me get a feel of the plane.

KS: That will be great!

TC: His friend took him up. He took pictures of everything and enjoyed it. Well, we've finished the war, I think. [laughter]

KS: Okay. So after the war, what did you do? So you all were still down in—you were down in Florida for awhile.

TC: I was still there, and when the war was over, I got out as soon as I could. And my uncle, in the meantime, was making good money in the restaurant equipment business in

Greensboro, and he tried his best to get me out of the service so I could come back and be his slave. [laughter] There was a way I could have gotten out, but I told him how it was. He'd have to write a letter, and he wrote a letter telling them what a great guy he was. [laughter]

KS: Did that do the trick?

TC: No, I didn't have the nerve to—I knew what the regulation was. You know I wasn't going to carry that out. So anyhow, when the war was over, I had turned down an appointment with the Eastern Airlines. The Air Force was releasing a certain number of pilots. They had to be in a certain age group, a certain number of four-engine hours, and I fell within that lot, and interviewed for that. But I was making four hundred and fifty dollars a month, and that's big money, and they offered two hundred and fifty dollars to start.

KS: That doesn't make sense.

TC: But later on they made good money, but I chose to go back to the business I thought would be mine. I didn't take much money while I was learning because they said it would stay in the business and grow. So I went back for that, and I found that the war had just changed business conditions as far as they were concerned. They were just money-mad, so to speak, and I was very much disappointed, but I couldn't fall in with the way they were operating the business. It just didn't appeal to me, so I decided I'd go into business myself with very little money and a lot of guts and a loving wife and a little baby girl. So I started in 1947, and I sold the business in 1981, and it was hard, hard work. I worked day and night, and my wife said when we sold the business, she said she finally had a husband. But we've had a good life—a great life—a good family with four girls.

KS: Four girls!

TC: Yes. The first two were close together, and the next two were ten years apart because Joan had depression. She had depression for a long time, but she did a great job raising those girls, training them. She was a good athlete: played golf and tennis and loved to dance, and loved animals, and loved growing things. It's just a good life. We didn't have time to do things. I tried to get some exercise and play golf on the weekend, and then tennis. We built a place up at Philpott Lake, and we did a lot of tent camping before that.

KS: What was Greensboro like during this time? When you got back from the war, what had changed in Greensboro since you had been gone?

TC: Well, when I came here it was 39,000 people. That's a small town. And during the war they had BC10 here, you know, out on Summit Avenue. They had an army camp. Did you know about that? An Overseas Replacement Depot. I don't know how many they had, but that made a real impression on Greensboro. They had the USO, the girls entertaining the soldiers, and the families, entertaining them and all that sort of thing.



Greensboro, of course, has grown up since then. The question is was it better or worse. I think, of course, it's better. We've built more schools, and things are just better, that's all.

KS: Anything that you remember doing with your children through the years? I know that people have talked about the Christmas Parades, and different things like that were going on in Greensboro.

TC: What I did with the children. Oh, I've got it written down here somewhere. [laughter] But we did—my two older girls were in the Greensboro Swimming Association. They were competitive swimmers, and my oldest was real good at free-style and butterfly, and my second one was real good with the breast stroke. They did that for a number of years, and we went around to meets all the way from Washington to Asheville to Richmond, and Greensboro. That took a lot of time, and my wife supported all that while I worked, and I worked hard and long, and I traveled around a hundred miles from Greensboro, did everything that needed to be done in the business: buying and selling and paying and hiring and firing [unclear, folding paper]. I did the plans for restaurants and all that.

KS: So once you retired, did you have any fun hobbies? Did you play golf more?

TC: Well, I played tennis. I always have liked to read and play bridge. We belonged to a bridge club at the Greensboro Country Club way back, right soon after we came back from the war, and we played bridge there for a number of years. When we came out here to Friends Home West fourteen years ago, we hadn't played bridge in a long, long time. We took it up again.

KS: But you never wanted to fly as a hobby?

TC: No, it cost so much money, and it takes time. One of my sons-in-law flew a plane in his business. He had a twin-engine plane, and his wife—my daughter—got her pilot's license, and she had a plane of her own. She wanted to be able to take over that plane if something happened to him when he was flying.

KS: That's a good idea.

TC: And [pause] where was I?

KS: We were just talking about how Greensboro was, through the years when you were raising your children. So you played cards, and played some tennis when you retired. Did you and your wife travel at all, or were you all interested in that.

TC: Well, in my business, I represented big outfits in the kitchen equipment—General Electric was one of them—and they had the Business Leadership conferences. They took about three hundred people at a time, and we had to make certain quotas before we were eligible to go, and I took Joan on those trips. We made sixteen of them. We went to—Joan and I both—Rio, Acapulco two times, Mexico City two times, Caracas, Venezuela, Jamaica two times, Bermuda three times, Hawaii three times, Athens, Israel, Spain.

KS: You did do some traveling!

TC: Yes, we did, but a lot of hard work in between.

KS: Sure.

TC: I did belong to a national organization, Food Service Equipment Dealers. We sold kitchen equipment, and dining room equipment, and all the supplies—china, silver, glass, pots and pans, you name it, and I still had my uncle as my competitor. [laughter]

KS: Really!

TC: Oh, let's see. Well, I joined the FSEI, Food Service Equipment Industry, from Chicago, and I helped to organize and was president of the NCFSEI, and we had members from lower Virginia and South Carolina and Tennessee and North Carolina. And I was successful in selling the business. I bought a couple of business buildings and moved along and sold those, too, and got completely out of it. I guess that's about all I can tell you about the business. But I did draw the plans, and worked with architects and engineers because they had to have plans, and they had to have all the engineering to go with it.

KS: So now when did you get involved with the Rotary Club?

TC: In 1950.

KS: Nineteen-fifty. Goodness!

TC: April twenty-fourth.

KS: Were you interested in other philanthropic clubs or did the Rotary get your main attention?

TC: Well, like I tell you, my time was real short.

KS: It sounds like it.

TC: And I joined the Rotary Club because I had a lot of friends that were in the club. It had about a hundred and fifty members when I joined, and in 1980, when I was president, we had two hundred and eighty five members, and we went up to three hundred and twenty five members, and during this depression we've had, it dropped back to two hundred and eighty, and our president this year has done a real good job. You met him.

KS: Yes, sure. He's very nice.

TC: And we have right at three hundred members now. Many of my friends and associates were members. I believed in the ideals of Rotary. I needed contact with other people, and stimulation. And programs: we had good programs. My attendance: I've been in the club sixty-three years. I'm now the oldest member of the club, and I have sixty-three years of perfect attendance.

KS: I had heard that; I had heard that before this interview. I think that is—everybody is just awestruck by that.

TC: When I joined the Club in 1950, we were the only club in town, and now there are five. I had to go out of town to make up. I'd go to small towns around and call on the restaurants, and hospitals, and churches and most of the time, I would meet people who were in the Rotary Club, and I'd go there, so I'd just plan to go to Rotary Club—to go to towns when they were meeting so I could go to Rotary Club for lunch. Some had night meetings, but I just enjoyed it.

KS: So you attended some of the meetings in other towns. Well, that's interesting because you could kind of see how they worked, and where they met.

TC: Yes, that's one of the great things about Rotary Club. I don't know whether you know about the history of Rotary or not, but it was formed in Chicago back in 1905 or '07—I've forgotten which—and it was a group of men who had certain ideals they lived up to, and they wanted to be associated, and they decided they would start this club and have classifications, so if you were a lawyer, you'd be the only lawyer in the club, or minister, or school principal, or whatever business. They had a classification system, and it was—some people kind of felt like it was theirs. But it later changed. We've got lots of lawyers, and lots of school people, and lots of everybody now. But I was able to meet people from just all walks of life. Okay.

KS: What kind of programs were you were involved in? What were some of your favorite programs or projects that you've been involved with in the Rotary over the years?

TC: Well, I did well to get to the meetings. [laughter]

KS: That's true.

TC: Well, I tried to work with whatever was going on. We did have Habitat for Humanity. We went to Tarboro, North Carolina, a couple of times, I think. I did that with the church group, too. And planting trees, cleaned up streams, supported the calf shows or cow shows or whatever they called it, that they were having back in those days at the Agricultural Center. It was actually a Kiwanis Club thing but the Rotary supported that, and of course I was on the Boy Scout board. Rotary was involved with Reading Connections and I tutored. You know we had the Fellowship Day, I attended those. And played golf or tennis, whichever I wanted to. I tried to do what the club would do. I was—I said president; I was secretary of the club for two or three years. Do you know Anne Fragola?

KS: Yes, I do know Anne!

TC: Okay, she was the executive secretary to the General who was the secretary, and while I was president, she was. A couple of years after I was president, they asked me to be the secretary. I said, "Well, I will if Anne will stay on as executive secretary." "Oh, yes, yes, Anne will stay." Well, before I took over, Anne said, "We're going to California for two years."

KS: Oh no!

TC: So Judy Herron was my executive secretary, and she was real good. Her husband was Bob Herron, a minister, Presbyterian minister. But then when Anne came back, she took over again, and she's still there—thirty-five years and counting.

KS: I know. I do know her. She's very nice. She helps a lot with this project.

TC: Oh, I see. She told me to be sure and be there next Wednesday for the meeting. That's when we change the guard.

KS: Oh, that's the big meeting where you change the guard.

TC: That's when I get my sixty-third badge.

KS: Oh good, your sixty-third badge this Wednesday. That's great!

TC: Yes, I was the first Rotarian of the Year—1977 Rotarian of the Year.

KS: That's really impressive!

TC: Nineteen seventy-seven. And so I'll get my pin. My wife's a Paul Harris Fellow; I'm a Paul Harris fellow; two of my girls are Paul Harris Fellows. I've had two of my sons-in-law in Rotary, but they're not in it anymore.

KS: Now tell me about the Paul Harris Fellows.

TC: Well, the member gives a thousand dollars for a Paul Harris Fellowship, and that goes into the Rotary Foundation, and Rotary Foundation supports scholarships, and peace all over the world. We had the Polio Plus program to eradicate polio in India, and I think they finally accomplished that, but Paul Harris Fellowships support the foundation.

KS: Well, the Rotary is a wonderful organization.

TC: I feel very lucky to have been in it all this time. In my hometown, we didn't have a Rotary Club. We had a Kiwanis Club, and they have Kiwanis Club here which has been very successful. But Rotary has far outstripped them, I think.

KS: Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about? Did we miss anything?

TC: Oh, are there any other questions you had there? I've tried to jot down some things.

KS: I think we talked about some hobbies you've been involved with, and how have you seen the—we could talk about how have you seen the Greensboro nonprofit sector change over the years? Have you seen the difference in the way nonprofits have been run, or how successful they've been since you've been, say, in the Rotary or in Greensboro?

TC: I haven't been too close to that. I know Habitat for Humanity has done real well, and the United Way. Greensboro Urban Ministry is tops; Children's Home Society; Hospice Palliative Care of Greensboro.

KS: Any idea of getting involved in local politics? You probably had too much going on.

TC: No, but I have my own ideas.

KS: What are those?

TC: And I'm very concerned, very concerned.

KS: In what way?

TC: I feel like we're going to lose our country.

KS: In what way?

TC: Because we're disregarding the constitution, and if we disregard the constitution, we're lost. And I don't see how we're going to gain it back. I've got mail spread all over my apartment. I couldn't take you there because it's such a mess. But people that are raising money and doing things to bring on improvement in our country, to impeach Obama—he's certainly impeachable, there's no question about that—to save Medicare and Social Security. The people paid for that; that's not government money, and yet they borrowed it all, and now Obama wants to take in thirteen million illegals, and pay out Social Security to them, and those who are illegal, and back in Mexico, and pay out Social Security, and we're already broke. And English as our national language, because it costs so much money to print everything that needs to be handed out, and to put up with all these different people. One hundred and fifty languages in the United States. We can't handle that. I don't see how we're going to survive; honestly, I don't. I pray for it every night.

KS: A lot of things are changing.

TC: It's too bad, too bad. We've got a lot of good people working to save it though. I hope they can make the grade. Well, let's see; I had down here under hobbies, bridge, reading, golf, tennis, stamp collecting—dancing and fishing.

KS: Oh, you collect stamps, too. That's great; that's interesting.

TC: My daddy and I started that and enjoyed it for years. I turned the collections over to my grandson.

KS: Now where do you go fishing? Are you a fresh water or salt water man?

TC: Both. I didn't even get to that. I told you our girls were swimmers. We camped and we built a place at the lake, and we had boats, fishing boats.

KS: Which lake was this?

TC: Philpott.

KS: Philpott Lake.

TC: Have you been there? A beautiful spot.

KS: No.

TC: And we carried our boat to the beach. Morehead City was our favorite place to go fishing, and of course Philpott is a big lake and has good fishing. And we taught our girls all those things. They loved camping; they loved being outside in the mountain; and loved animals and growing things. They've all followed those things all their lives.

KS: Any grandchildren?

TC: Yes, oh yes. We have nine grandchildren.

KS: Nine grandchildren!

TC: Yes, and a few greats.

KS: That's a great family.

TC: We have been blessed; no doubt about it. So they liked to do all these things, and one girl has an MBA in business. She was a top executive with Prudential Insurance Company in New York, Chicago, and Atlanta—in charge of the Atlanta office. When they closed Dallas and Miami, she took those over, and she resigned to raise her two daughters, but she does landscape architecture as a hobby.

KS: As a hobby, goodness.

TC: She wrote me a Father's Day note and told me how pleased she was to observe my way of doing things, and work I did on the drawing board and so on. She followed right in, in

that line, and she's got a—one of her daughters is a junior, rising junior, at Georgia Tech. They live in Atlanta. The other one graduated from Georgia, and all the rest of the family graduated from Georgia. But she has started an entrepreneurial society at Georgia Tech, and they have dues, meetings, and she gets very good speakers to talk to them. She had quite a write-up in the Georgia paper and a business week paper. She started a cake business when she was fourteen years old. And very successful. She still does some cakes on the side, and of course she's had business experience running that cake business. She's just remarkable.

KS: She's got business sense like you do.

TC: So Debbie said she gets that entrepreneurial spirit from her, and she caught it from me.

KS: I think that that's definitely true; that's definitely true.

TC: Well, I'm mighty proud of them, and now about my wife. She's been in Friends Home, Guilford, for almost six years now—short-term memory loss—and that's really been a blow to all of us. If there's anybody I ever knew that I thought might be a prospect for that, she was not it, but your mind certainly plays tricks, and that's hard. My oldest daughter says everyone needs a mom like my mom. Joan has certainly been a wonderful wife and mother and she loves the Lord.

KS: Well, I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today, because I know you do go visit her every day.

TC: Yes, I do. I go for lunch, and for supper. I go back for Lawrence Welk on Saturday night.

KS: I used to watch Lawrence Welk with my grandfather all the time. I know all the people on Lawrence Welk!

TC: That's—Joan does, too. She knows the people and the songs, and she still knows them.

KS: Well, you said you all liked to dance, so you were dancers.

TC: Oh, yes. On our first trip to Rio, we decided we had to take lessons to learn the Latin dances, and that's when we got into it.

KS: That's wonderful.

TC: We went to a lot of dances. So, there's a lot out there to do.

KS: Yes, there is.

TC: Now tell me something about yourself.

KS: Oh dear, oh well. Let me finish this off and I'll tell you. Well, thank you so much for our interview today, Mr. Cochran. I appreciate it.

TC: Tom.

KS: Tom, thank you.

[End of Interview]