Harvey Koency Oral History
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William R. Courtney Texas State Veterans Home
Temple, Texas

Interviewer: Mr. Koency, can you tell me where you were born and when?

Koency: I was born in Arlington, Texas, July 13, 1925.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Koency: Albert Koency and Fay Gilbreath … her maiden name.

Interviewer: Have you lived in Arlington a long time, or did you live in other places?

Koency: I was born there, and was raised there, and left when I was 18. I was interested in aviation and I wanted to be a Navy … I wanted to be a dive-bomber pilot. I went to Dallas where they took the mental and physical exams, and they said I had one eye that wasn't quite up to carrier status, you know. I went to the Army Air Corps and they said you're just fine. So I became a member of the enlisted reserve corps. They were to call me after my 18th birthday. I didn't have to register for the draft. As a matter of fact, I got into trouble. I never even reported to the draft board. But I turned 18 and they wanted to know why I didn't register. I forgot to tell them I had a special card. I was a member of the enlisted reserve. My military time started from the time I became a member of the enlisted reserve. I reported to Dallas in August of '43, and reported to … I guess there was about 60 of us, and they took us to … believe it or not, the Army Air Corps had leased the Miami beach, the hotels there on Miami beach. I don't know if a lot of people are aware of that.

Interviewer: I didn't know that.

Koency: Yes, they leased the hotels there and that's where we went for our basic primary training. Boot camp at Miami beach. And it was miserable in those hotels. I was in the Tides Hotel — 10 floors — and I lived on the 10th floor. And we couldn't use the elevators. Officers only used the elevators. Anyway, we had to march in the streets. It was hot. And we had mess halls there. They actually rented a bunch of hotels there and turned them into military barracks. And we had calisthenics on the beach … that was the one fine part about it. We could go swimming for five minutes after the calisthenics. And after that I went to Syracuse, New York … University of Syracuse. I was part of the ASTP — Army Specialized Training Program, and we were aviation students. And we covered a lot of curriculum there. It was enforced — I mean shortened — intense study periods. I think it was about … we spent six months there. We went to the university for classes, but they rented the old houses around there the students used to use, and we used those as barracks.

Interviewer: Now this training at Syracuse, was that navigation training?

Koency: No, no, no, this was just regular class curriculum, military subjects thrown in. And intense training in mathematics, chemistry and physics. They were college courses. There were 2,000 of us there.

Interviewer: Do you know what they were preparing you for?

Koency: Yes, to be airmen. Anyway, it was a very, very fortunate time for me. From there, let's see, I went to a classification center. That was at Nashville, Tennessee, I believe. You spent two or three weeks there and were subjected to intensive tests, including medical and psychiatric examinations and all types of examinations, to determine whether we were qualified to be bombardiers, pilots or navigators.

Interviewer: Can you describe some of those tests?

Koency: It's been so long, I don't remember.

Interviewer: So anyway, you took some of these tests, and …

Koency: Yeah, it was an intensive battery of tests. They were really intensive.

Interviewer: About how long did they last?

Koency: Oh, they'd last, it would be four hours in the morning and four in the afternoon.

Interviewer: How many days?

Koency: The tests themselves would be about 30-40 minutes, you'd have a break, you know. These tests — we were kept there for two or three weeks, but the tests lasted, I'd say at least a total of four or five days of tests. And you had to go see, you had to interview with a psychologist or psychiatrist, and some other people. The physical examination was intense. It was fairly interesting. But anyway, there was some background … that data was used later by educators to establish some of these curricula, these tests you're getting now. Every (unintelligible) they had so many million men, you know select young men to test … very valuable data for future examining, you know, like your SAT … those kinds of tests. A lot of that information was very useful later on.

Interviewer: What were the factors that influenced you to join the Army, and specifically, the Army Air Corps?

Koency: I had an intense interest in aviation. And the war was … the war came on. I remember I was out, going down to the store, it was on a Sunday afternoon when I heard it on the car radio. Pearl Harbor. Well, that's it. I was 16 then, so I started intensifying my studies in high school to better prepare myself. I intended to get into some part of flying. I didn't want to get into the infantry. My father had been in the Texas 90th

Division in World War I. Meuse and the Argonne. He made a great infantry soldier, but I didn't care for the infantry. I was more interested in aviation. And the war came along and I had this opportunity. I was born at a time where the burden was on us, the youth, and we were born at the time … this is not a matter, you know, of being fortunate or unfortunate. Actually, it's an opportunity. You have to look at it as an opportunity. You did what you were needed to do, but at the same time it's a personal opportunity. I would never have had the background and the education and training that I have without this opportunity. And the war brought that about, so war's not always bad. Anyway, after the test classification center, I went to the … let me think … I wish I'd known what you were going to ask, I would have tried it in my mind. I went to Montgomery, Alabama for the cadet training. For cadet training? Aviation cadet … that was three months as I recall.

Interviewer: Was that Maxwell Air Force Base?

Koency: Maxwell Air Force Base, yeah. It's an old bomber installation. It's probably still there, I'm sure. It had permanent officers' homes. As the rank got up, the homes got better.

Interviewer: So you went there for cadet training?

Koency: Cadet training, yeah, aviation cadet.

Interviewer: And by this time, you knew you were going to be a navigator?

Koency: No, no, I didn't know what I was going to be because the washout rate's pretty high. That was the place where you underwent military discipline, that was sort of, rather similar to the — what do they call it? The 90-day wonders, they used to call the officer cadet corps. Anyway, it was very intense … very intense training. That's where you ate square meals, sat on the edge of the seat and ate square meals, you know? And all kinds of discipline. It was very interesting. And that's where we lost our hair, you know, and started wearing the crewcut.

Interviewer: Can you describe what it was like? Was there a lot of physical training?

Koency: Oh, yeah, very intense physical and mental training. One of the things that used to wash guys out was Morse code. You had to take a certain level of Morse code.

Interviewer: How did you do on it?

Koency: I did, well, I made it. I wouldn't be here. I mean I wouldn't have had my career. This one fella was caught cheating, and he was one of the older guys, cadets, he was 27, at the limit. And he had been a member of the Texas state highway patrol. He was a pretty arrogant type of guy. At any rate, they drummed him out. They start a drum-out in the mornings. You stand at the gate with your bags and everything, you're ready, but he was going to be shipped to the infantry. It's just at the entrance to the field there, and on the PA system they play this special tune for guys sitting there, and it just

lasts for a few minutes. He was drummed out of the corps. He wasn't discharged from the service, he was drummed out of the corps.

Interviewer: And packed off to the infantry.

Koency: Right. Anyway, I thought that was rather amusing, but it wasn't amusing. It was sort of … he deserved it.

Interviewer: What did you think of your equipment while you were training?

Koency: Well, we can get into that in a minute. And then from there, I was supposed to go to navigation school, and I can't remember the name of the place … I wound up in Twin Cities, Louisiana. In the meantime, they didn't have room, so, luckily for me it was extra training, and I enjoyed it. I went to a flexible aerial gunnery school at Temple Field, Panama City, Florida.

Interviewer: Did you say "flexible aerial gunnery?"

Koency: Flexible aerial gunnery. That meant in the gun turrets. Like the B-17, the B-24.

Interviewer: And how did you do on that?

Koency: I enjoyed that. That was a very great time. I enjoy shooting, I like guns.

Interviewer: Were you a good gunner?

Koency: Oh, yeah, I'd have made a good gunner, but I specialized in the Sperry ball turret. Are you familiar with the B-17? The one that hangs below. Right behind the bomb bay, below. And you have the waist gunners with the flexible 50s on either side, and then you got the tail gunner, you got the top turret gunner — sits behind the pilots in the cockpit. The later B-17s had two chin guns and cheek guns. They had 12 .50-caliber machine guns.

Interviewer: You could fire either the flexible guns or the Sperry ball turret.

Koency: I was in the Sperry ball turret, which was the most …

Interviewer: That's dangerous, isn't it?

Koency: It was. It was sort of a thrill, hanging under there, you know, with the gun plates on either side of your head, and you had a special gun sight. You framed the target, track it and frame it, keep it framed, and the deflections were almost automatically calculated. Just keep the target framed and track it, and you were going to hit the target. You're sitting there crunched down in this thing — I was a lot smaller then — the gun plates are on each side of your head, the gun plates of the machine gun. Anyway, after

flexible gunnery school … and we had an interesting event there, too. We were sitting there after flight one day watching our buddies come in, and this B-17 … I don't know what happened. The pilot made a mistake. He stalled out above the ground, too high, and the plane pancaked in and exploded and burst into flames. And you could hear guys in there screaming, you know? Burning. Actually, we were out there watching them land. We'd come down ahead of them. And we were asked to identify the bodies, because these had been the guys we'd lived with in barracks, you know? And I couldn't go to duty for a couple of days. So training command is actually dangerous, believe it or not. In some ways it was more dangerous than some combat. This was Panama City, Florida. And from there I finally made it to navigation school. That took, I think it was six weeks there. I enjoyed that, because I got all the shooting I could handle. Started off with shotguns, and shooting skeet, and then shooting from the back of a truck around a circular track. It was very well done. The training was — I tell you — the training we got was very intense and very appropriate. The training command was really up to its job, in my opinion.

Interviewer: So that was all the way up through gunnery school and basic and now you're about to start navigation school?

Koency: Navigation school. And I can't think of, or remember that … was it Selmon(sp?) Field? It was at a place called Twin Cities there in Florida. I just can't remember for some reason. Anyway, I graduated there as a second lieutenant with the navigator wings, in 1944.

Interviewer: Do you remember the month, or the time of year?

Koency: Oh, let's see. Probably around October or November, I guess. And then from there we went to …uh, in fact the war wouldn't be lasting much longer. I got in on the tail end of it. Anyway, we went to, uh, then from there you went to, what was it? Nashville, Tennessee I believe it was, I mean, no, it was a place in Nebraska. Anyway, we went there to join up, for assignment from there to a crew-training center. Dyersburg, Tennessee was where we went for crew training. That's where we joined up with the pilot, copilot, the navigator, bombardier, the crew chief, and your radio operator, tail gunner, the Sperry ball turret gunner and the waist gunners. A 10-man crew.

Interviewer: That's when you first met the crew you were going to go overseas with?

Koency: Yeah, for crew training at Dyersburg, Tennessee in B-17s. These were some of the old E models, some of them were former combat things that were rebuilt and brought back. And they were used for training. It seems like everywhere I went we had an accident. There, we did formation flying, to train the pilots in formation flying, and I remember all the crew flew. You know, crew familiarity, learning to be air buddies, you know, depending on each other, how to get together, how to behave in the air. And formation flying one day, two B-17s came together, one on top of the other, and there were 10 men killed. Not everybody bailed out. What happened was one of 'em … it was a very tragic thing. The pilot was supposed to be the last man out like in a ship sinking.

Anyway, this pilot bailed out before his crew bailed out. That's where the heavy loss was.

Interviewer: What would happen to a pilot who did something like that?

Koency: He'd be court-martialed. I don't know what happened to him really. But anyway, that was a tragic thing. It seemed like everywhere in training we ran across something like — let's say that training command was fairly dangerous. High risk. Because flying's a risky business anyway … military flying with young fellows. Interesting to note that James Thomas McNeil, he was from Port Saint Joe, Florida. He was our pilot. He was 21. Our copilot was from Atlanta, Georgia … Arthur Kaiser. He was 23, the oldest officer. Our bombardier was 21, I think, too. I was 19. Still hadn't made my 20th birthday yet. Our oldest man was the crew chief, he was a tech sergeant, two rockers. He was 27 years old, had a southern drawl, from North Carolina, and we called him Pappy … 27. The other fellows, the gunners were anywhere from 19 to 20 years old.

Interviewer: Where did everyone come from?

Koency: I'm not sure just where all of them came from, I just list the officers. The crew chief though came from South Carolina, one of them came from (unintelligible), a lot of them from western states. One of them from California … I'm not sure where all the gunners came from.

Interviewer: So, did the crew live together, eat together?

Koency: Oh, yeah. The crew chief was in charge of the enlisted men, and they had their barracks. The officers lived … we had a four, a four bed … there's four cots on either side. And this one little Quonset-type hut with a big coal stove in the middle to keep it warm. It's cold there in Dyersburg, Tennessee in the winter. Because we ended training there .. it was November, December, January … I forget when we left. It was right on the Mississippi River. In fact, it was a very good place to simulate English weather, because it was cold, and wet and foggy.

Interviewer: Do you think it was deliberately chosen for …

Koency: I don't know why. Anyway, these military bases were apparently chosen with some purpose in mind.

Interviewer: So you officers and the crew, you all bunked together?

Koency: We bunked together, yeah.

Interviewer: How many officers were in the crew?

Koency: There's four: pilot, copilot, bombardier and navigator. And while we were there at Dyersburg I got some training with … I checked out on that Norden bombsight. I also took the bombardier's place in case he was a casualty.

Interviewer: Were they still very concerned about security for the Norden bombsight?

Koency: Oh, yeah. The Norden bombsight was … well when they took the Norden bombsight out … now this was in Dyersburg, hardly anyone could get into the base, but anyway, I carried a Thompson submachine gun, a 20-round clip in it as we took the Norden bombsight out to the plane. The idea was, not to protect the bombsight from anybody taking it. If anyone tried to take the bombsight, my job was to just empty the 20-round clip into the bombsight to destroy it.

Interviewer: How would you describe the Norden bombsight?

Koency: It's a box about this dimension in every direction. Maybe 18 inches, 20 inches, something like that.

Interviewer: Box shaped you say?

Koency: Yeah, it's box shaped.

Interviewer: How much did it weigh?

Koency: I don't know, maybe 20-25 pounds, something like that. Anyway, it was very complex, highly classified. And actually, the bombsight tied into the autopilot. When you got on the bomb run, and our practice runs, of course, at Dyersburg, the automatic pilot — you're familiar with that term? It's still used. The automatic pilot controls the airplane on its own. And the bombsight is tied in to the automatic pilot so that the navigator actually flies the airplane to the bomb run, and over the bomb run to the release point for the bombs. You got to the IP — the initial point — and then the bomb run. Everything has to be steady. That's when you're a sitting duck from ground fire.

Interviewer: You can't deviate from that no matter what.

Koency: Right. You have to stay on that and then when the crosshairs click at the right time, it's bombs away.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how the bombing process worked? You were the navigator, so you had to get the …

Koency: Pathfinder. There's always the lead in any formation flying … we're getting ahead of ourselves now. The airplanes flew … there were flights of three, and four or three flights made up a squadron of 12 planes. And three squadrons made up a group. That's 36 aircraft. And they flew with a low squadron, a middle and a high when they flew in formation for combat.

Interviewer: Is that the combat box formation?

Koency: Oh, yeah, it was a formation … I expect you've seen some pictures of it? Anyway, there was always the lead navigator, and the lead bombardier. The lead navigator and the lead bombardier, they went to the IP — the initial point — which was selected (unintelligible) miles from the target. Maybe 15-20 miles. And they (unintelligible) line everything up, the bombardier lines up the … adjusts the bombsight, and the bombsight is controlling the airplane, the bomber, and then they stay on that run until they reach a certain point from the target where the bombs are released. Bombs travel in an arc, they arch downward. They leave at the speed of the aircraft.

Interviewer: So they still have forward momentum.

Koency: Yeah, forward momentum. Anyway, it's all calculated by the bombsight. And the old thing was, you know, from 20,000 feet you could put everything in a 500-foot circle, or something like that.

Interviewer: So your job as a navigator would be to find the IP and then from that point the bombardier …

Koency: Well, you just follow along, because the lead navigator was in charge of that, the whole thing. If you were by yourself … I'll explain some things later. But anyway, the B-17 normally carried ten 500-pound bombs. That was about 5,000 pounds.

Interviewer: And this was for a mission going what distance?

Koency: Well, anywhere from 600, 700, 800 miles.

Interviewer: That was combat radius?

Koency: No, no, the B-17 had a much greater radius, but it depended on the fuel load. You're getting ahead of things. Ordinarily, let's say a bomb run would be, let's see, 6-700 miles … four hours made it … up to a thousand miles. Usually not much over 6-700 miles because the more fuel you had to carry the less bombs you could carry. The B-17 had 1,780 gallons in the main tanks, and had two Tokyo tanks — called Tokyo tanks — in the outer wing panels. Five hundred gallons. We very seldom used those in Europe, but they were called Tokyo tanks, so we could go into Tokyo. The engines normally used 150-160 gallons per hour. Forty gallons per engine an hour. Anyway, you got the ten 500-pound bombs, and you got the ammunition, which is heavy, and the crew, so we limited the B-17 to about 58,600 pounds for takeoff. The British operated 'em up to 65,000 pounds, but if you had an engine failure, it's a certainty you couldn't takeoff, couldn't get off the ground. If you had an engine failure on (unintelligible), when you were ready to leave the ground, you wouldn't have any way to … you just fall back in. But anyway, the B-17 was quite a capable plane, it could … when you take off with a full load of bombs, fuel and crew and everything, and you meet at a point somewhere where

you'd get into the group … you'd join the group. You had to assemble the airplanes. That was very dangerous. Lot of times you had mid-air collisions. Especially when the weather was bad.

Interviewer: I understand it was something like jumping onto a merry-go-round, or something like that?

Koency: No, no, no, it wasn't that bad. It was a procedure. It took a lot of precision flying.

Interviewer: Did the planes fly around and around until everybody …

Koency: No, they had to get to a grouping point. They had a procedure for that. As they took off, you know, you'd take off fairly close together and you'd meet at the point. The squadrons would get together and then they'd form the group. It could be a very … in bad weather, it was pretty bad. But anyway, then they'd climb to altitude, usually 22, 23, 25,000 feet.

Interviewer: Excuse me. How long did it take for everyone to get all grouped together, to the point where they would start climbing to altitude?

Koency: Fifteen, 20 minutes. Fifteen minutes to climb.

Interviewer: That's for how many aircraft?

Koency: It depends on what the effort was. If it was a wing effort, it was maybe a hundred airplanes, or more. But if it was a group effort — I was in the 351st Bomb Group at (unintelligible) … I'm getting ahead of myself now. I was explaining, back when I was in Dyersburg … now, from Dyersburg we went to Atlanta, Georgia, where we picked up a brand new B-17. They were brought in from Seattle, Washington, to Atlanta. It was a model G, the latest one at the time … model G. And there was no armament or nothing on it, that was done at … I forgot the name of it. But anyway, that was a pretty intense little period there. I forget now, it was sometime in March, I guess. March of '45. The war was almost over. I remember getting a physical exam and checking my teeth at 2 o'clock in the morning. We took our B-17 up and tried it out, and then we came back and left the next day for England.

Interviewer: Now how did you go to England?

Koency: Okay. We had no more taken off from Atlanta, when we had siphoning. In other words, fuel was leaking out of the fuel cap. In the top of the wing you had these fuel caps on the tanks. Anyway, there's this little vent in there, and this was siphoning fuel out, and this was pretty dangerous because it gets into the exhaust stream of the engines and can start a fire. Anyway, we solved that by going up and down, you know? Diving and pulling up, jolting the plane — it broke the siphon. The next stop was Grenier Field in New Hampshire. Manchester, New Hampshire. Now, going over, it was

traditional to fly by the Statue of Liberty and dip your wings. And also to fly over Washington at 5,000 feet. Bolling Field in Washington. Bolling was where they kept the interceptor fighters to protect Washington. And they had the P-39 Airacobras, the little ... the engine was behind the pilot. It was a very well balanced, aerobatic little airplane. It didn't have much range, but anyway, you'd go over Bolling and you'd see two P-39s taking off together and they'd be on your wingtip in two minutes. One on each wingtip and they'd escort you across Washington. This was tradition. It gave the fighter pilots something to do, taking off and intercepting their own. That's what those fighter planes were for there, they were pretty fast climbers, they'd get to 10,000 feet in two minutes.

Interviewer: Before this, had you ever trained with fighter planes?

Koency: No, no, no, this was just tradition. Then we spent the night in Manchester and took off, headed for Goose Bay, Labrador, the next day, over the St. Lawrence River, the mouth of the St. Lawrence, in the east (unintelligible) Labrador. This was our first experience like that. So for me, it was a big challenge as navigator, because I was on my own. It was somewhat challenging. When you're young, you don't get exhausted too easy. I was 19, 20. Eventually, we landed in Goose Bay. And an interesting thing there … this was early April, as I recall. Late March or early April. And on any side of the runways, the snow was packed up 10 feet, 12 feet high. It was like landing in a valley. We landed there and spent, I guess it was a couple of nights there. But anyway, in the billet where we were staying we ran across a British crew of a Lancaster. You heard of the British Lancaster? The Lancaster was a bomber. It was a fine airplane. I wish we had the engines they had, those Rolls-Royce V-12s. But anyway, we got into an argument with them about who had the best airplane, and the next morning, this same crew was going to take off ahead of us. They were going to show us how … the full fuel load of these lucky bastards that … they were taking off with a full fuel load, and we were waiting there behind them, watching them take off, and they were going to do a short field take off. They got up off the ground too soon and dropped back, the landing gear exploded on the airplane — it broke off — and they wound up tail end in the snow bank on the side of the runway. Full fuel load, but nothing happened. They all got out. Anyway, we took off and we were supposed to go to Greenland, and in Greenland at the time — they're still there — they built two airfields. One of them called BW1 … Bluie West One and Bluie West Two. They were up the fiords, two fiords, not too far apart, on the southern tip of Greenland. And we were supposed to go in there. But in that area, the weather goes to hell in a hand basket quick. There were 20 of us in this particular group.

Interviewer: Twenty aircraft?

Koency: Yeah, we took off just a few minutes apart.

Interviewer: And these were the aircraft you trained with?

Koency: No, no, no, no, no, not at all. We weren't familiar with them at all. There was no chance to send everyone you trained with at Dyersburg in a group like that. No way at all. Anyway, we were mixed up in the air, there were 20 of us (unintelligible) in the

weather, you couldn't see your wingtips. It was pretty bad weather. And we were climbing up to 7-8,000 feet, seven or 8,000, and there was no way we were going to go to Greenland in that kind of weather. Because these fiords are very interesting. When you make an approach up it, you got one chance to land. If you undershoot, you go into the water. If you overshoot, you run into the hillside. So you've got to have completely clear weather. There's no room to turn around.

Interviewer: How many days of good weather were there on average?

Koency: I don't know, I didn't make it to Greenland. But anyway, it changes quickly. It's a real weather factory of the world up there. Anyway, we were cruising along, and I told Mack — he's the pilot — I said, let's get the hell out of here and he climbed out of this thing. So we — at 10,000 feet you're supposed to use oxygen — so we put on our oxygen masks at about 10,000. So we're still climbing, and we climbed out at 17,000 feet. The overcast topped out at 17,000.

Interviewer: Was there any danger of colliding with any of those …

Koency: That was the problem. We didn't know. There were 20 guys flying around in that soup, we didn't know how far they were apart, or nothing. Pretty dangerous.

Interviewer: Tell me, if you had had to make a landing there, did you have instruments that …

Koency: No, no, no, there's no way you can go on instruments into one of those fiords and land at the airfield. No way. No way whatsoever. But anyway, we got everything cleared and we pulled out and we went to … it's a good thing that B-17s got long range tanks. And we headed then, instead of going to Greenland, we were going to Reykjavik, Iceland.

Interviewer: You had the range to do that, not land in Greenland but go directly to …?

Koency: Oh, yeah. So then we headed to Reykjavik, which is, you know, quite some distance. And that was doing dead reckoning navigation.

Interviewer: What is dead reckoning navigation?

Koency: Well, you know your air speed and you know your estimated wind, and you know what your heading is — your theoretical track across the map of the earth — and you calculate your drift. You see, when you're flying, you're part of an air mass. And as you're drifting, let's say you got a crosswind of 20 knots — we worked in knots — airspeed, windspeed, everything in knots, the old nautical mile. And let's say you're flying one hour due east and you've got out of the north a 20 mph wind. If you don't correct for that wind, in one hour you'll be 20 miles south of where you would have been in a no-wind condition. So you have to correct for the drift of the wind. It's like a ship at sea, he has to correct for currents. You're part of that air mass that's moving. See what I

mean? Anyway, dead reckoning means using your estimated wind speed. That's the main thing you look for in your navigation, you try to calculate the average wind that's been affecting your plane. You have to have some way to find your position, from either the pilot looking at maps of the land, or celestial navigation, or from radio. We didn't have all the electronics that they have now. Loran, that came later.

Interviewer: No radar navigation?

Koency: No, no, no. The English had … you're getting ahead of something, the next thing I was going to talk about. Well anyway, we got into Reykjavik, Iceland, and then we took off the next day to head for Wales. An airbase in Wales in England. Then we flew over the tip of … we hit Ireland and came on down … there's a place called the Isle of Man, which is off the east coast of — is it east or west? The west coast of England. It's a large island. We were in front of the Isle of Man, we were at about seven or 8,000 feet, and I saw a Lancaster bomber down below us, a patrol bomber, and it was armed apparently. The war was still on. Anyway, I said, Max, let's just give these guys a little surprise. They were ahead of us, so we trimmed out the B-17 and went into a dive, and we passed them doing 300 mph. We were flying at about 2,000. They were tracking us, you could see the gun turrets tracking us, you know. Of course they got our number, every aircraft has identification markings on it, and when we landed in Wales we were arrested. By our own MPs. Because the British had radioed in that we had dove on them. I want to be able to say what we did though, was feather the outboard engines, one and four, and went by at 300 mph to say that we passed a Lancaster on two engines. We were brought before the English wing commander. He was sort of grinning and he couldn't hardly keep from laughing, I guess. He said, well chaps, welcome to England, but he says, don't dive on a Lancaster bomber anymore. We apologized and told him what the reason for it was. We had little arguments back in Goose Bay, Labrador, with these guys you know. Anyway, they took it in a good sporting fashion. And after that we spent a couple of days messing around in different places and then wound up in Polebrook, England. That's near The Wash, there's a place called The Wash, in the east, about 90 miles north of London. That was where the 351st Heavy Bomb Group was stationed. It operated out of three airfields. England at that time was nothing but interlocking traffic patterns — one airfield — there were so many of them. And later, we got familiar with everything, and the English had a radar called the GEE box. They used ground waves, Loran uses sky waves. But the GEE box is very accurate within its limitations. Very accurate. As a matter of fact it sort of saved our potatoes one night. I got pretty handy with it, and I was sort of innovative — I wish I had been. We were equipped with a GEE box. You could actually locate yourself within a few hundred feet.

Interviewer: Could you detect terrain features, rivers …

Koency: No. You have a station that sends out a signal, and another station that sends out another signal, and where these signals intersect tells you the distance from the receiver. It's like that for Loran, too. A slave station and a master station. I would actually sit on the end of the runway, at our airfield there — that's when we were at

Polebrook. Let's see: Grafton, and Deenethorpe, and there was another, I forget the name. Three airfields there, but anyway, these were names of the little airstrips there. Polebrook was the name of the area, the town there. There were three different airbases, 12 aircraft out of each airbase. They were just one-way strips, with barracks, and quarters and everything for air facilities to maintain 12 aircraft. So, the three squadrons made up 36, which was a group. Sometimes we wouldn't get all the aircraft off, there'd be two or three out of commission. Anyway, the GEE box, I'd sit at the end of the runway and would take a GEE fix — at the end of the runway. In other words, I could use it to home in on — I'd set these coordinates in the GEE box — and actually home in without seeing anything. I practiced that. I limited my vision so I could just see the GEE box and was able to talk the pilot in right over the runway.

Interviewer: How far away could you find your home field, or a target?

Koency: You simply navigate to 5-600 miles, 700 hundred miles, something like that. You'd go certain legs. You'd start out on certain headings — I can't go into the details of it now, it gets too complex, but anyway, we used various systems of navigation to get over the land, whether you could see it or not. If you could see the surface, you'd use maps and call it pilotage, by visual. You'd identify the landmarks, they're identified on the maps, outlined on the maps so well, you could associate them with (unintelligible).

Interviewer: Did ya'll ever have three-dimensional models of targets to study?

Koency: No, no, no. Just pictures. Pictures of the targets. But anyway, this GEE box fix at the end of the runway came in very handy one night, but this was after the war was over. I'll explain that in a minute. During the time we were there, we had some interesting experiences. One for me in particular, since I was one of the new officers coming in, they would always give them the, what do you call it? It was escorting the young ladies from Polebrook to a certain club there, to the enlisted men's club on a Saturday night dance. I had to chaperone these girls. Oh, yeah. They called it the box detail. I had to check out the motor pool. I had to carry my web belt and a 45, and trench coat, everything … flashlight. But anyway, I was in command of the detail, so this kid … 19 years old, you know? This was a hell of an experience. Anyway, we went to the motor pool, and checked out 6x6s. Your familiar with the Army term 6x6?

Interviewer: Oh. Trucks.

Koency: It's a truck, yeah. It's got twin axles. Actually, it's got three axles, power axles. You got eight wheels in the back and two in front. And they all get power. Anyway, it's the little GM 6x6 … a very good truck. We went from the motor pool with two of these, down to this place where we met 'em in Polebrook. The ladies were there with their escorts.

Interviewer: Who were these ladies again?

Koency: They were English girls. They were local girls. All their men were being shot at or killed. They were pretty hungry. But anyway, they were pretty lonely. All the eager young English girls, but anyway, they were selected of course. Good, clean girls. They would go to the enlisted men's club, which was out in a little wooded area around the air base. I was supposed to chaperone them, make sure they got there, and got back, and nothing hanky-panky. See what I mean? The enlisted men in my crew were there — Pappy and the other gunners. In the course of the party, around midnight, it gets a little raucous. Invariably, somebody's going to try to take some of these girls out in the woods, which they did … tried to. And I had a hell of a time stopping them, we almost get into a fight, and I pulled out my 45 and shot it twice through the ceiling. That brought a little order, you know? That makes a lot of concussion inside a building. That brought a quiet to things. The enlisted men in my crew came over to protect me in case some of these guys were going to fight. In other words, that calmed everything down and we finally got the party over, and everybody was mad at me and everything, you know? This was about midnight, one o'clock, something like that. It was sometime in April of '45. Anyway, I got 'em back in the truck and I got back about 3 o'clock in the morning, and I came in and got hoo-hawed by my buddies. They wondered what … The next day I had to report in for what I did. Why the hell did you have to fire? I said, well that was the only way to stop all that ruckus, they wouldn't calm down. Anyway, I didn't get in trouble, or anything. An interesting incident. Now, the other thing … we were briefed for three or four missions in a row, but the war was going so fast, it was almost at an end, and these missions were scrubbed. So I never actually made a combat mission. Here's something interesting: After the war was over, for a few days, for some reason I got a Bronze Star. But I think it was for something else. It wasn't due to combat. They made a deal to fly French prisoners out of Austria — French soldiers who had been made prisoners and stayed there for years, all during the war as prisoners. And we picked them up between Linz and Wells (sp?), Austria. This was after the war, and just a few days. So we went over. We took all the armament off the B-17s and we boarded up the bomb bays. And we did this for two or three days in a row.

Interviewer: Actual lumber to board them up?

Koency: Yes, yes, so the prisoners could … we packed the B-17s with French prisoners. It could be dangerous for them and for us, but anyway, we made some deal with the French government to fly them out, I guess out of gratitude or something. But anyway, I guess it was pretty popular with the French government. But going over, we could fly at low altitude. So we actually went over at about 500 feet. And we got over part of Germany — this was interesting — and suddenly, I realized we were over the Black Forest. Real low. And I looked up and suddenly realized the ground was coming up faster than … coming up at us. I told Max, I said, hell, Max, hit hard right rudder, we're about to get into the trees. He said, oh, shit, and banked around. And then we spiraled upward to get altitude to go over the hills in front of us. I was nervous, I was out in front, of course. These little things like that make it interesting. So we got up over the other side of this hill, and Bavaria there is very plain, very beautiful country, so we hit the deck again about 500 feet, and flew on to Linz and Wells (sp?). I just did it all by pilotage. I had good, accurate maps. Good weather, and everything was clear.

Interviewer: So how many prisoners did you take back?

Koency: We took about 25 in each airplane. I had four of them up in the nose with me, and they were all smelly and everything. We were all sprayed thoroughly inside our flight suits and everything with DDT. You come back and take a bath at night, and that DDT was all over you.

Interviewer: So what were the French prisoners like.

Koency: They were a pretty wretched bunch after spending four years in prison under certain conditions. They were so rank. Some of their clothes they'd been captured in. They had these heavy wool coats, and things like that. Most of them were pretty thin. We had K rations for them and water and all that. As we came back, we'd fly them around the Eiffel Tower — circled the Eiffel Tower — and they'd practically want to jump out. And we'd land them at a little air base south of Paris. One night we got off late, it was almost dark. So we reached Paris. It was night. Everything was lighted up and we flew around the Eiffel Tower. Looked prettier then. We went down to this little air base. In those days, most of the air bases had been bombed out. They had bomb craters all over the place that hadn't been all covered up and filled. They had to use special lights so we could see the runways. So our landing lights and the runway lights on this little landing strip were the only things we had. But anyway, we got rid of our prisoners that night. It was getting late, and we taxied out and all of a sudden — bump — we ran into a small bomb crater, about two feet deep. That was interesting. We couldn't get out of the damn thing. We revved the engines up full, almost got to the edge of it, but couldn't pull over it. We didn't want to ruin our engines. We kept doing that two or three times and all of a sudden we heard a chug-chug-chug. And here comes — would you believe it? — a little Renault farm tractor. A French farmer had been watching all this. And he came up, and we tied on to that landing gear with a rope, and he gave us just enough pull with that tractor for us to get out of that crater.

Interviewer: How many of these trips did you make?

Koency: That was the last, that night. They were beginning to get worried about us, I guess, because we were late. We'd been there a couple of hours trying to get out of that hole. And this is where the GEE fix came in handy. Going back to England at night like that, it's poorly lighted, the runways. How are you going to find your airport in conditions like that, 90 miles north of London at night? Pitch black. That's where that GEE fix saved us. I knew I was 50 miles or so from the airfield. So I homed in on the end of that runway with the GEE box. Pitch black night, and we came right over the end of the runway, picked up the landing lights and everything. We had these little blue lights they used in the war, even though you can only see them at a close distance. Outlined the runway. But you have landing lights — big strong lights that shine out in front of the airplane. So we made it back in.

Interviewer: You only went once to pick up the prisoners?

Koency: No, no, three or four times. That was the last time, that night, that that happened.

Interviewer: Was it common to use bombers for transport like that?

Koency: No, no, that was something special. I think that's why the whole unit got a Bronze Star, for that work with the French. Some unusual things came out of the war.

Interviewer: Crammed into a B-17, it must have been tight.

Koency: It was. It could have been dangerous for them, too, if we'd had engine failure or something on takeoff. It would have wiped out a bunch of Frenchmen. Ourselves, too.

Interviewer: How did you hear about the end of the war?

Koency: It was at night when the word came out — VE day. Some of the British fighter planes were flying around celebrating, you know, the next day. That night, some of the guys were running around drinking. Everybody was drinking. I didn't drink in those days, but a little later I got used to that. Guys were shooting at the ceiling and all that kind of stuff. Everybody was real happy.

Interviewer: So you hear about victory in Europe. How long after that until you got to come home?

Koency: Just a few days. We took one of the old war weary B-17s and flew it back. We flew to Iceland, then to Goose Bay and back to the States.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about your return home, the reactions of your family and friends?

Koency: That's interesting. The little town I was born and raised in — Arlington, Texas — was about 2,500 population then. Everybody knew everybody, it was a small town. I was in a lower middle class family probably. Dad was mostly employed. We had enough, we did fairly well — it was the Depression. The Depression was an interesting time. Nickels and dimes meant something then. I went home for a couple of weeks leave. I got out of the service in December of '46. I spent some time in South America, Brazil, flying around and doing air transport service and air-sea rescue. But anyway, you get back home, you've done a lot, seen a lot of things, and you wonder, what kind of little hick town is this I came from? What's happened here? This place has changed. Places you go, you're happy about, the fishing holes and all that … just completely lost interest. What you realize is, those places haven't changed, but the person has changed. Your family doesn't seem the same, your friends, and all that. Nothing's like it used to be. Sometimes, I had a pretty tough time with that. I realized what it was. It took me a few weeks to realize it. Of course, it's not a hick town now. Probably 400,00 population, it's

a big place. Grown like crazy. Anyway, you come back with different views, you grow up a lot. Emotions, feelings … you have a different view of the world, a different outlook on things. And then, what are you going to do with yourself afterwards? Anyway, I got an opportunity to go to Natal, Brazil. So I operated out of there for a while in MATS – Military Air Transport – and air-sea rescue. Between Natal and Ascension Island, made quite a few flights out there and back. And air-sea rescue in a B-17. Had a 36-foot boat strapped to the bottom, and it had four cables holding it to the shackles in the bomb bay so that you could drop it for anyone stranded out in the ocean. It would come down with three parachutes. It had two Briggs and Stratton, single cylinder, air-cooled engines, gasoline and everything. It was a pretty good setup for about 12 people. They could live at sea for some time. One night, another pilot who could fly the B-17, and myself, and a radio operator, were the only sober people on the base at the time. And Saturday night, the base commander, Colonel Caine – Killer Caine – was in the officers' club and everyone else had had too much to drink to fly. I wouldn't say they were drunk, but they weren't in flying condition. An Italian airliner called in. It was on fire, 600 miles off the coast. I found it, circled it, but the fire was out by then. They'd had a fire in the galley. Came back in. Interesting little night. I was flying between Rio de Janeiro to the south, Ascension and West Palm Beach, Florida. A little military airline. Carrying all kinds of stuff, cargo mainly.

Interviewer: So how were you feeling at this time? The war was over …

Koency: Looking for something to do. Finding out how to direct your life after being exposed to a lot of things in that short period of time. Something you'd never have realized if it hadn't been for the military. See what I mean? I'd been a small town boy all my life. Gave me a different outlook on things, what you felt and your reactions and everything. War is not always a bad thing. Good can come out of almost anything.

Interviewer: When did you hear about the atomic bomb?

Koency: I tried to get into a B-29 outfit, the 28th Air Force, on Guam. After flying in a B-17, that B-29 was something. The navigators had all kinds of … the equipment is more electronic and everything, and you had an air position indicator and all kinds of special instruments. And I remember, I got in several flights in a B-29. I was pretty impressed with it. It was pressurized. A tunnel over the bomb bay was pressurized. You'd go from the back part – there was a gunner's position back there, pressurized – to the nose. The interesting thing about the B-29 was that … well, anyway, I need to get back to where I was. They were staging to go to Guam, and invariably there'd be a B-29 coming in with an engine smoking almost every day. They were flying every day, too. And the war was over while I was there – VJ. That's when I got into this aircrew pool in Dallas, and finally to Natal in Brazil.

Interviewer: What did you think about your commanding officers?

Koency: I never got too close to them, really. I guess the closest I ever got was when I was in Dallas, I put in to go to pilot training school. I was planning to stay in the

military, and I had an interview. If you wanted to fly you had to be examined by the commanding officer of the base and his staff. That's about as close as I ever got. It's interesting. I would have been one of the early jet jockeys. You know when they went to the F-80? When they started turbine-powered aircraft? I'm sure I would have been in Korea, probably got in Korea. It was interesting. I was out on Ascension Island — of all places — I was out on Ascension Island, and a letter was given to me by an orderly as I was starting to sleep. And why it went out there I don't know, but it was a letter telling me I had been accepted for the next class at Randolph. But in the meantime I'd made up my mind to do something else.

Interviewer: So you could have gotten into flight school?

Koency: Oh, yeah, that was the idea, to go through as a first lieutenant. To go through pilot training as a first lieutenant in grade. But I was more interested in something else – still interested in flying. When I went in I wanted to be a dive bomber pilot or a fighter pilot. The effect of war, the changes in your life and the aspects of it, it all adds up. You got time in a place like this to look back and reflect on where you went wrong or what you did. I se a lot of things I did wrong, but some things right. And sometimes you … Well, that's just life.

Interviewer: Can I ask you what was the most emotional experience you had during the war?

Koency: Oh … maybe I was pretty cold hearted, or something like that. Not cold hearted, but I didn't pay too much attention to emotions then. Oh, let me see. Oh, yeah, I guess it was that girl in Casablanca in the officers' club. Jumped in my lap, squeezed me to death between her titties, and I finally found out … that got me all upset. When you're 19, 20 years old and an 18-year-old, hot-bodied French … You know, one of the Moroccan-French? A pretty nice little girl. Anyway, I said, Betsy, don't do that, I can't breathe. She said, I killed you with love. I found out later what the problem was there. One of the guys warned me, said she's looking for an American husband so her father can get his money out of Morocco. That causes some emotional upheaval. You see what I mean? One of the traps of life. You never know sometimes what you escape and what you don't. I later wound up falling to a Peruvian beauty.

Interviewer: What was the most difficult time for you in the military?

Koency: Navigation school. I was an overdoer in many ways, and I had to graduate, you know, because people get washed out along the way. Not that I had any difficulty with navigation, but I was afraid I wasn't going to make it. I shouldn't have been afraid. I was just one of these worry warts. I'm sort of a perfectionist by nature. Oh, let me see. Oh, yeah. I guess one of the most emotional times was those bodies at Tindall Field in Panama City, at flexible gunner school. They were burned to death and I had to go look at their bodies. I had to take two days off. I wasn't the only one – there were two or three of us. You know, guys that you bunk with and laugh and joke and mess around.

They looked like roasted pigs, you know. That's an emotional shock. Emotional shock. Why? You quit asking that question. It just happens.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that I should have asked you, or that you'd like to say?

Koency: No, that's all I guess. I'm 79, so I'm still not senile yet, but I'm gonna get there.

Interviewer: You remember Betsy pretty well.

Koency: Yeah, and some other girls, too.