

Interview with Art Shay, Kassel Mission reunion, Labor Day weekend, Chicago 2009

Aaron Elson: Okay, you're Art Shay, you were with the 445th Bomb Group?

Art Shay: 703rd Squadron.

Aaron Elson: Where were you from? Where did you grow up?

Art Shay: I grew up in the Bronx, New York, and I enlisted, I left college after nine or ten months, I was in Brooklyn College. I was going to become a great writer, and I ended up in the Air Force, which is where I wanted to be. I had a childhood interest in airplanes and aviation.

Aaron Elson: What sparked your interest?

Art Shay: Well actually my father, in 1905, he had been in Paris, he went up in a balloon that was tethered near the Eiffel Tower, and I always liked to relive that and hoped that someday I'd get up in the air like that. I was building model airplanes, so I really got interested in it, and I washed out of pilot school in Corsicana, Texas. I couldn't land worth a damn. The instructor says, If you don't know how to do sex any better than you can land a plane, you'd better get somebody to have your children for you." So I became a navigator in San Marcos. I began flying combat across the ocean, that was a big thrill, navigating across from Goose Bay, Labrador, to, over green, green Ireland. We made landfall at a place called Derry na Cross, and wonderfully green, Ireland is really greener than anyplace else, because it's on the water in the Gulfstream etcetera. But we were a replacement crew, and we started combat the first week of May in '44. and D-Day was our 12th mission, and before that we had, around the same time, we led the Berlin, I became a lead navigator, I remember our squadron twice led the whole 8th Air Force, I remember Berlin, 800 planes, and I think Hamburg was 1,100 planes. Berlin, Hamburg, Brunswick, Karlsruhe, Essen, Cologne, and a lot of those terrible cities that sent up a lot of flak.

Our most terrible mission was on Sept. 27, '44, when 35 of us went out to bomb Kassel, Germany, and the winds aloft were about 100 knots but were only indicating like 150 so we weren't going very fast, you could go faster on the expressway with a car. So our fighters missed their rendezvous because of these, they didn't believe the winds we were getting, so they couldn't navigate, or didn't navigate properly, and our tail gunner, Wagner, said "Oh, here they are at last, 6 o'clock level."

"Those aren't Mustangs, those are Fokke-Wulfs!" And that's how we got bounced, they came in about 16 abreast and they shot the hell out of us, and as the history goes, we lost 31 planes, four of us got back to the base. I was lucky to have survived, all my great navigation ability was, I said, "Turn left here," and we got out of the area.

Aaron Elson: What did you as a navigator see? What did you witness in that battle?

Art Shay: Well, the fighters came in at 6 o'clock from the rear, and they shot us up, and then they split-S'd out. In other words they did a violent maneuver after they passed us and came back for more. It's called a Split-S for some reason, it looked like they were following up a ski slope. And that particular day was my 29th mission, and we were breaking in another navigator on the desk, so I was doing pilotage from the nose compartment, and that's when I shot down a Fokke-Wulf about 60 yards. I had only used a machine gun once in training, and it was an Emerson turret, and, so I had urinated in a flare can, and in the excitement, the turret jammed, it could only open about two-thirds of the circle, and somehow the urine can went up in the air as we maneuvered and hit me in the forehead, and it started to spill over my face, and I thought I had been hit and this was blood coming down, but it was only urine, so that was pretty lucky, but I got this one guy at about 60 yards, and I raked him up and down around about, he bailed out and I remember he was wearing a black flying suit and a yellow parachute, and he opened it too soon because we were about 23, 24,000 feet, so he must have had an oxygen problem on the way down but he also must have been hit.

That was my memory. I'm Jewish by birth but an atheist in belief, and that was the morning of Yom Kippur that day, so that was a good omen for me, so I could look out and about 40 feet away was my friend Ira's plane. Ira Bernstein ... Weinstein ... and I saw his plane blow up and he apparently, he got out in a parachute, but he ended up having to bury five of his crew members right where it fell, those wonderful German farmers made him dig out and bury them. Still, Ira's much more forgiving than I am, he did 19 months [actually seven months] in a prison camp, a stalag, and he still goes back every couple of years. He's 90 now, I'm only 87, and he goes back and he has dinner with some of these fighter pilots who were shooting us, and I've always felt that, I said this in a play I wrote called "Where Have You Gone, Jimmy Stewart?" which ran here in, like 05, 06, and it was about my adventures at Tibenham. And I absolutely refuse to have

anything to do with these Germans, doubly so because a) I'm Jewish and they did things like make soap out of people like me, and of course as an American flier they tried to machine gun me. So I understand that they're sorry, etcetera, but I still don't feel up to breaking bread with these people or celebrating this terrible event that occurred to us. I can understand the moral resonances of what happened, but I still don't feel I should be a party to them. That's just a personal preference.

I finished my combat tour Oct. 3, 45, and I went, I volunteered to fly in a secret mission squadron that we had. I had been stationed at 8th Air Force headquarters after my combat tour, went home and got married about the 30th of that year, came back, and then began flying missions in and out of Sweden. We would take Red Cross supplies in in unarmed B-24s which were called C-87s and we flew Red Cross supplies in and took out the internees who had been shot down over northern Germany. And I did 22 of those flights in and out of Stockholm, and we only flew in bad weather, and flew in the clouds, got up out of the clouds, took a fix, a three-star fix, and then went back in and worked it out. So I loved celestial navigation, and in fact when I was at 8th Air Force Headquarters, the RAF had a book on celestial navigation which was in English English, and I translated it into American American. I wish I had a copy of it. So I loved celestial navigation. So they dressed us in civilian clothes that we got on Regent Street in London, about \$200 worth, we got passports and flew as civilians, meaning if the Germans shot us down they could have executed us as spies.

The night the war ended in Europe, which was May 8th, we were flying over Trondheim, Norway, on our way back to Medfield(?), England, and we were about, I don't know, we were about still 20,000 feet high I think, but we were letting down, and all of a sudden, and we could hear the Paris crowds and the London crowds on our radio. The Paris crowd was called, the Paris tower was called Paramount. And we had the London crowds in the street, and it was very thrilling, and on my intermike, I put the two lobes of the mike on my harmonica, I was a good harmonica player, and we played all kinds of songs over the air, that was our celebration. But as we passed over Trondheim, Norway, or just before this, a plane appeared in the sky. It was a twin-engine, I think it was a Heinkel, it was a German plane, and I thought, "Oh my God, we're gonna get shot down in the last minute of the war." And I tried to reach the German guy, the radio man did, on the radio, and he kept waggling his wings, but I finally got some kind of contact with him. It was a Norwegian pilot up for his last ride with a German colonel, and I kept saying, I couldn't speak German but I could talk Yiddish which was related to German and I said, "Kamerad, Kamerad, Surrender," and I said, "C'est terminee," in French. And whatever I could say to get across the idea that the war was over, and pretty soon they peeled off and went on into Oslo I guess. And then we passed over Trondheim where the lights of the city came on all at once after eight or nine years of blackout and it looked like a flower of reds and oranges and greens, all lighting up from the center of town. And I had tears in my eyes, most of us did, and we went on into, back into Medfield, England.

After that, we flew a few more flights to Sweden, but then I went on back to the States to be a married man again. I stayed in the Air Force because I had friends at the Pentagon, and I began writing articles for the Washington Post, and there I was a poor kid from New York, I was getting 125 bucks a month, I had a car and we had a little girl at the time, and I had never seen that much money in my life, so I stayed in the Air Force, kind of hiding, and I flew the Pacific flying the wounded back home, I did that for a couple of months and then we were on our way to Germany with a flight and we were in a snowstorm over Prince Edward Island and we crashed flying blind in a snowstorm, so we ended up about 50 yards from the edge of a 1,500-foot drop. This was March 23, 47, and I did a lot of pictures which ended up in Look Magazine, and Life Magazine saw them and Associated Press bought them, they were all over the world, and my wife was notified that my chances, we were up there four days, my wife was notified that the chances are we wouldn't be found in a mountain plane crash. We hit the only big snow bank within 80 miles flying blind in a snowstorm, because the field was reading clear, they were about eight, nine minutes away, and none of the maps showed anything above 2,000 feet and we hit at 2,200. So we were pretty lucky to get out of it with just minor injuries.

Then I decided I had to get out, so by then I was fairly well known as a writer and photographer. Look offered me a job as a photographer, and Life offered me a job as a reporter, and the Washington Post for whom I was writing Sunday features and printed a full page of my poetry about the D-Day mission, they offered me a job as a writer. So then in a short space I had three jobs, so I figured I could always be a newspaperman and Look magazine was sort of like second rate compared to Life and here's a chance to work on Life. I would have preferred being a Life photographer, but they had a lot of refugee photographers, Eisenstadt, people like that, so the editor said no. He had been looking over my shoulder as I was writing the Air Force story on a teletype machine to send to the Washington Post. So, and Joe Thorndyke was the editor of Life, so he says "We'd like you to be a Life writer." So I ended up as a Life writer. I did about 60 or 70 stories as a reporter working with 15 to 20 of the greatest photographers in the world. I'd always loved photography so I learned quite a bit from them. So after two years on Life magazine here in Chicago, having been in Washington, I was Life's youngest bureau chief then in San Francisco, and I worked in Chicago for a couple of years, and by then we had two children and I just said no, I'm going out on my own, and I did, and the first year out I made \$30,000 as a photographer which was pretty good money in those 1951, the second year out I made \$60,000, and by the third year I was doing more photography for more magazines than any of my competitors. I was the first freelancer they called from Life, from Time. Sports Illustrated didn't come along until 54, but Fortune, Forbes, Business Week, This Week, Parade, a lot of magazines, and those pictures now, some of them are being sold for up to \$3,500 through my gallery in Chicago, the Steven David Gallery. So I had an exhibition of Chicago pictures this last year in Paris at the Galerie Albert Loeb, and they sold 49 of these old journalistic pictures. I asked them if they wanted of my Paris pictures because I had shot quite a few in Paris right after the war and again in 55, and they said, "No, we only want picture of Chee-cago." And so I'm

very fortunate in that, and I'm looking forward to my new play being produced here about a year from now.

Aaron Elson: What's it called?

Art Shay: It's called "The Alzheimer's Comedy." It's about, semi-autobiographical, it's about two old people, a couple facing the inevitable, and how do you know when you want to put out your own lights? That part isn't autobiographical, we've both been very lucky in retaining most of our deep memories, but it has to do with one of the problems that seniors face nowadays, so that's what I'm dealing with right now. That and I have a big exhibition coming up, in color, just color pictures, at the Masters Gallery in Chicago that will open in December or January, it'll be January 10. So my pictures sell nicely and I still play racquetball three times a week, I was a national racquetball champ in 1982, the senior division, masters division, so I started group that still has 50 members, we play, I play with the group Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sunday mornings. So I still do that. The only place I really feel my age is in my knees. So that's been my life so far.

Aaron Elson: Just going back a little bit, did you lose any ... when did your family come over from the Old Country?

Art Shay: Well, my mother and father both came over around 1908, 1910. My mother was from Odessa, Russia, my father was from Riga, Latvia.

Aaron Elson: Did you lose any family in the Holocaust?

Art Shay: Yes, we lost something like 50 people in the Holocaust, people we never knew but who were there. Those wonderful Germans.

Aaron Elson: How did you come to be 18 years older than your oldest brother?

Art Shay: Well, my father was 41 and my mother was about 20 when they got married, so they had me right away and another brother who's seven years younger who's here today at this reunion as are the twin brothers, who were born in 1940. So my mother was 41 and my father was 61 when they were born. They came here for the Air Force reunion.

Aaron Elson: And you had said that you came back after your tour and you got married, right?

Art Shay: After my first tour, yes. November 30th, 44.

Aaron Elson: Had you been corresponding with your wife, or how had you met her?

Art Shay: Oh yeah, we were sweethearts in summer camp.

Aaron Elson: Summer camp?

Art Shay: Yeah.

Aaron Elson: Where'd you go to summer camp?

Art Shay: Up in the Catskills. I was the camp bugler, that was, I was once the bugle champ of the Bronx.

Aaron Elson: Go on!

Art Shay: Yeah, the Boy Scout bugle champ of the Bronx, when I was like 14 or 15.

Aaron Elson: My family is in the camping business.

Art Shay: Oh, really?

Aaron Elson: My sister has a summer camp up in Pittsfield, Mass.

Art Shay: My camp was Camp Winston, on Lake Winston, right across from the Laurels country club. I briefly held a job at the Laurels Country Club as a waiter, a busboy actually, and I had gotten fired from Camp Winston because I was 17 and they caught me in the canoe house, they caught me learning sex from our nurse, she was ancient, she was like 22, but she was a great teacher. And they caught us and they fired me, so I just rode across the lake in a canoe with my few possessions, my little camera, and I got a job at the Laurels Country Club as a busboy. Now the Laurels was then owned by the Novaks, they're the couple that built the Fontainebleu in Florida which was the world class kitschy hotel of our time, but I got fired from there too because one day Harry James and Betty Grable were the guests, and they were having breakfast and I was taking away the dishes. Harry James was wearing his Laurels country shirt inside out so it just looked, it was backwards in the letters. So as I reached over to take his dishes away, I spilled these dishes and eggs on Harry James' bare knees, and he yelled and screamed and was pretty hot, and Betty Grable yelled and screamed, and Mrs. Novak came over, the boss' wife, and she said, "Arthur, you're fired!" And she says to Harry James, "I wish this war was over already because then we will have good busboys again." She hoped the war would end. But before I left, I was enterprising, I set up a little darkroom there, with a borrowed enlarger, and I made a print of a picture of Harry James and Betty Grable, I made a picture of him with his reversed T-shirt and I reversed it so you could read it as Laurels Country Club, the letters came out right, so I gave it to her as a present, to Mrs. Novak. She said, "This is a miracle! A miracle! It was all backwards, you made it straight. How can I fire you? Just don't spill eggs on no celebrities." So I promised never to spill another egg on a celebrity and I never did. And I just lasted till the end of the season. But my wife and I stayed in correspondence.

So by now I've done about 55 books, mostly kids' books and sports books, instructional books, all kinds of books. I was showing them, a recent magazine cover showed me sitting on about 50 of my books.

Aaron Elson: I saw the cover. What's your favorite book?

Art Shay: The one, well, I did one, the newest one it's a very famous one now, it's called "Chicago's Nelson Algren." Algren is a great Chicago writer who was a friend of mine. He was also the lover of the great Simone deBeauvoir, the great French writer/philosopher. They were friends of mine, and I made a famous picture of her naked in the bathroom after a shower, so you're looking at her rear end and she's looking in the mirror. That picture ran last year as a cover of a French magazine, L'Observateur, I've done about a thousand magazine covers, different magazines, but that cover caused a big stir in France on morality because deBeauvoir, in addition to being the woman belonging to Jean-Paul Sartre, the great philosopher, she wrote the Second Sex book, and was the founder of the women's lib movement in France and all over the world, and they thought it was terrible that she was shown nude. So the New Yorker magazine did an article about that picture and me, and I'm dealing with that in the play, the circumstances of it, and one of the points is, a diary is found of hers in which she describes, she was then 41, she describes having sex with this handsome young photographer, so I refuse to tell the magazine any details of it. So that becomes a factor in the play having to do with my memory, the things I'm dealing with right now.

Aaron Elson: Okay...

Art Shay: Well, thank you very much. Will you send a copy of that?

Aaron Elson: I certainly will.