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Ken Todd

Frank Zimmerman, interviewer

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Evergreen Retirement Center in Normal, Illinois

Ken Todd talks about his personal background. He was born on a farm between Danvers and Carlock, Illinois in 1928. He was from a family of nine children. He was a middle child. His parents were farmers. There were a lot of children to help with the farm. He attended school in a rural setting.

At the age of seventeen he graduated from high school. He received a draft notice soon afterward. He decided to choose the Air Force. The war ended in the March of 1946 when he enlisted, but he was still considered a part of World War II.

He didn't have the education to become a pilot. He was trained to be a flight engineer. He entered into the Korean War. He was twenty-one years old. He was part of a B-29 bomber crew. They had a crew of ten. On his third flight he was on a night flight. As they entered the target area they were hit by flack. Their engine was hit and was on fire. They had to drop their bombs to get out of the flight area. They got the fire put out and they could not feather the prop. He described getting the plane under control. The waste gunner called him on the phone and told him to look at the number two engine. It was leaking oil. They were still over enemy territory. He figured they had thirty-five minutes of oil left. The navigator hadn't taken a moon shot or sun shot, but thought they had crossed the demarcation line. They were able to contact Iwo Jima. They were advised to get within twenty or so miles from the ocean. They kept the airplane on auto pilot and headed down at one degree. They bailed out of the airplane in a sequence. They landed OK and it was pitch black. They couldn't see the ground when they bailed out at 1700 feet. He talked about using a parachute. His ear was halfway torn off by the parachute opening up. They whistled for each other after they landed. It was seventeen degrees below zero. They had a B-1 bag with them with clothing. They had the parachute canopy, too. He had wrapped his head to stop the bleeding. He scraped up a pile of leaves and lay down with the parachute around him. He heard a vehicle about daylight. It was an Army truck. They were out looking for them. Once they found them it was easier to find everyone because they were all lined up. They did have a medic corporal who sewed his ear back up. They got into warmer clothes and they went to an Army base. Once they got there the doctor looked at his ear and said it was a good job.

They were able to take a plane to Okinawa. Four months later they had to ditch an airplane in the north Atlantic. It was in June and they ran out of gas. They were flying back from North Korea. He had determined that the gas tanks were full and the transfer pumps worked. They had 700 gallons in each outer wing of the plane. His job was to transfer gas between the tanks. The indicator gauges showed all the tanks were full. He talked about the ages of the crew. They were in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The radio operator got in contact with a Japanese submarine before they ditched and was able to share

their position. They could see the submarine on the surface. They were able to ditch the airplane and landed six or seven hundred feet from the submarine. They got out their life rafts and paddled over to the submarine. Most of the submarine crew could speak English. They waited for four hours before a ship came out to pick them up. He talked about what was wrong with the airplane tanks. The tanks had to be drained and pressurized to find leaks during an inspection. A valve had not been opened and caused the problem.

His crew was split up. He talked about the plane they used to haul people. He spent five more months to finish his tour of duty. He described how they found parts for their plane and how they started a plane in a unique way.

He talked about how he ended up in Alaska. He was stationed in California and was flying large cargo aircraft. He was married and had a young daughter. He was looking for places that had openings. There was a position in Alaska with an air rescue unit. He shared his first impressions of Alaska. He extended his billet to four years. They were based in Anchorage. They had an average of 300 rescues per year. This was in the mid-1950s. He was working as the engineer on the plane. They were using a Grumman plane. It was able to land on land, sea or snow and ice on lakes. He had a private license. In 1958 they moved to Michigan and decided to move again after two years. He was able to change careers and took a position in Bonn, Germany.

While he was in Alaska he met Bishop William Gordon who was the flying priest. Todd said Gordon was the Episcopal bishop of Alaska and had a plane and license. A lot of times Gordon would get in trouble. Todd did the maintenance on this plane. Gordon would fly out to the villages. All the airstrips were unpaved. Gordon had little huts at the end of the airstrips and stored gas cans in them. They used to carry ten gallons of gas in their plane and filled up the gas cans in the huts. Todd said Gordon was a nice guy. Todd became a deacon in the church. On several airplanes he carried consecrated wine for service in the villages. Todd talked about one of the priests in a village. The bishop flew a Cessna 170. Todd said Gordon was a very sociable man and considered him a skilled pilot. Todd had a license to do maintenance on planes. He said life in Alaska was hard for people. People were prepared and respected the weather.

He described a Christmas Eve rescue. Their rescue unit was on alert 24 hours a day. He was the manager of the engineers. On a flight from Fairbanks to Anchorage a doctor and his family had to make an emergency landing on Long Lake after the engine started acting up. Todd's crew took off and the parachutists landed and said the lake was good for landing. The doctor was able to land. Todd's crew landed and picked up the family. Todd could see water dripping out of the cowling on the doctor's airplane. The doctor hadn't used carburetor heat and it iced up the carburetor. They flew the plane out the next day. Another Christmas Eve a woman was giving birth and needed to be evacuated. The village was close to Nome. They had a primitive runway. They didn't have a doctor with them. The doctor had been drinking and couldn't work. They tried unsuccessfully to find another doctor. Their paramedics were close to certified nurses. Their oldest paramedic had delivered several babies. They had to leave without a doctor. Their paramedic delivered the baby. The mother had been laboring for over 24 hours. The baby was born with a loud pair of lungs. The mother was given something to put her out. When they

got to Anchorage there was a large crowd to greet them including the press. The mother and baby were taken to the hospital in Anchorage.

Todd said many of their rescues were tragic. They had to go to many places where crashes had taken place. He said Alaska was still under control by the federal government at that time. They used to have to go on strip alert. They would fly up to the very top of Alaska. There was a national weather station at Point Barrow. They had to run the engines on the planes every three hours to keep them running for three days at a time. They didn't know why they were there. They were waiting for a U-2 spy plane to return to northern Alaska. The pilot knew what was going on, but the rest of them didn't know. It would take them an hour to get the plane warm and they would dilute the oil with gasoline. He thought they flew up there about five or six times. They could see polar bears on the ground as they were flying. He said a lot of their work was humanitarian. Todd talked about Bishop Gordon again and his work. For a long time Bishop Gordon didn't have anyone helping him. There were the two of them that brought communion to the villages. The villages didn't have trained pastors. When he went into the village everyone got communion.

Zimmerman asked Todd if he had any advice for young people. Todd didn't think young people understand Christianity. He said he runs into people who don't know what it is to sit in a church.

Todd talked about returning to Alaska for a visit. He said Anchorage had changed immensely. He remembers traveling from the base across Ship's Creek and now there is a large concrete bridge across it. He remembers walking down to the creek on base and panning for gold in the creek in the summer. He bought forty acres in Alaska and paid a thousand dollars for it. The previous owner had built a cabin on it. It was located in the hills above Anchorage with a stream going through it. He sold it when he left Alaska. Now the area is part of Girdwood and the property is worth a lot of money.