

FHS Oral History Project – Melvin “Mel” Jenner

Description:

Melvin “Mel” Jenner was born in Goodrich, North Dakota, in 1922. His family moved to Michigan when Mel turned four years old, and he recounted his upbringing. A fascination with airplanes led Mel to join the Michigan International Guard during high school. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the federal government mobilized the National Guard, and Mel enlisted in the service. He recalled his military service in World War II, serving mainly as a left waist gunner in a B-17 bomber aircraft. Mel flew forty-six missions, including six over Berlin and his final one at Normandy on June 6, 1944. Mel continued his military service after World War II, participating in the Berlin Airlift in 1948 and 1949. McCoy Air Base marked Mel’s final duty station, and he recollected his occupation at the base and his general observations before the area turned into its present-day function as a civilian commercial airport. Mel stayed in Orlando after he retired from the military, emphasizing how the bass fishing scene and outdoor life attracted him to settle in Central Florida. Mel worked at Disney for over twenty years as a painter and tournament director for Disney’s bass fishing club. In 2024, as part of the 80th anniversary commemorations, Mel visited Normandy for the first time since the war. Lastly, he explained why he continues passing his story on to future generations.

N.B. Dennis is Mel Jenner’s caretaker who assisted in communicating some of the questions, as Mel suffers from hard hearing.

Transcription:

00;00;04 - 00;00;24

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Melvin “Mel” Jenner on March 24th, 2025, at Mr. Jenner's residency in Orlando, Florida for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. To begin, can you please share where and when you were born?

00;00;24 - 00;00;36

MEL JENNER: I was born in Goodrich, North Dakota on November 13th, 1922.

00;00;36 - 00;00;39

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you tell me about your childhood growing up?

00;00;39 - 00;01;11

MEL JENNER: Well, when I was about four years old, my parents moved from North Dakota to Michigan and I was, at that time, the only child they had.

00;01;11 - 00;01;13

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What was it like growing up in Michigan?

00;01;13 - 00;05;12

MEL JENNER: Well, it was cold. But I always had lots of fun as a youngster. And my sister was born when I was six. But that was a time in my life that I experienced some bad things that happened. My sister was born, and my mother had her in our house, and while she was recovering, a friend of hers came to visit her and brought her son. Her son was about a year or

two years older than what I was. And in the rear of our house was an alley. And the garbage trucks used to drive down that alley to pick up trash. They had a machine that was digging a trench down this alley. And I and Wilbur, who was this boy's name, went back there with the little girl next door to play. And while we were back there, we went down into this tunnel like, and for some reason or another, the tunnel caved in. And the only thing that was shown above the Earth at that time was my hand. And of course, if you walk by and you look down and you saw a little boy's head, it was quite a shock to the one of the workmen that was walking by. Anyway, they dug the little girl and I out and carried me back to the house. And when the man knocked on the door and the lady that was visiting my mother came to the door, the man told the lady what had taken place. And of course she said right away, "Well, where is Wilbur?" And I said, "Well, he's down there too." And the man said, "No, we got everybody out. There was no third person." And I said, "He's down there." Well, they went back and dug some more and found him, but he had already passed away. And, of course, that was my experience very early in life of something real sad.

00;05;12 - 00;05;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What did your parents do for a living?

00;05;16 - 00;05;43

MEL JENNER: What they do for a living? Well, my dad worked at Henry Ford's, and my mother was a housewife, and all she did was take care of our house and cook our meals and do what mothers do.

00;05;43 - 00;05;46

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What type of education did you have?

00;05;46 - 00;06;18

MEL JENNER: I went through grade school and high school there in Detroit and, I played football, and I played baseball and I played soccer. So I was well versed in all of those things.

00;06;18 - 00;06;20

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What was the name of your high school?

00;06;20 - 00;06;25

MEL JENNER: Northern High. Yeah.

00;06;25 - 00;06;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What position did you play in football, baseball and soccer?

00;06;33 - 00;07;17

MEL JENNER: In football, I was an end. I could run and catch the football very well. And in baseball, I played every position except a catcher. My dad was a professional baseball player, and he was a catcher. And he even caught Babe Ruth when Babe Ruth was a pitcher. And, of course, I loved anything that had a ball.

00;07;25 - 00;07;31

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: In high school is when you joined the Michigan International Guard, correct?

00;07;31 - 00;08;35

MEL JENNER: Yeah. I was right out of high school when I was—I liked airplanes, and I always had airplanes in my mind. And I went out with a friend to Michigan International Guard outfit that he belonged to and of course, I wasn't quite old enough to join, but I talked with some of the officials out there at the Romulus airport, and they said I had to be eighteen. And of course, I was not an eighteen. So I told them a little fib and I joined.

00;08;35 - 00;08;39

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Besides airplanes, were there anything else that inspired you to join?

00;08;39 - 00;17;20

MEL JENNER: Yeah, it was the airplanes that really inspired me. And of course the airplanes was an old forty-two, and I was put on a crew as a gunner. We only had two members to the crew, a pilot and a gunner. I had a half dozen flights during that period of time. Anyway, after Pearl Harbor, the National Guard was mobilized into the federal service and, of course, it meant that the United States would be at war.

I was sent to a gunnery school at Harlingen, Texas, and graduated that gunnery school and I went to a radio school at that time. And so I became a radio operator gunner. We were on limited duty, and we was waiting our orders to go overseas. And, at that time, I was sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to await a ship to take me to England. After I got on the ship and we was on our way, it took us about six or seven days to make the trip. But we landed in Scotland and went ashore, [then] took a train to London and I was sent to a base called Redding, England. And, we had no airplanes for about two months. Finally, we got word that our airplanes were on the way. Well, it's just so happened that General Eisenhower was in Africa, and he wanted those airplanes. So we were going to get more than what we did. So our planes went to North Africa, but about two or three weeks later, we did get about a dozen A20s attack bombers, which was a twin engine airplane and was a crew of only two.

But we trained in the A20 for about three or four weeks before we were sent on our first combat mission. I flew a number of flights, and, our airplanes, we lost all but two of them. And, of course, one of them was the one I was assigned to. And our squadron was asked if we would want to send the two airplanes to the Royal Air Force and fly combat with them because they had a couple squadrons that had the similar airplane. So we did. While I was there, I flew a total of fifteen combat missions and was recalled back to the Americans. At that time, we didn't have any airplanes, but our airplanes were supposed to come again. But they never did at that time. So I went in and asked my squadron commander if he would arrange a transfer to a B-17 outfit. And, of course, he thought I had lost my mind, but I didn't. And I told them the reason why. At that time, if you had twenty five missions, they would send you home or send you back to the States for more training, and I thought that would be a good thing. A week or so later, I was transferred to the 452nd Bomb Group. And it was a B-17 outfit that had just arrived in England. They had flown a total of two combat missions when I was sent to them. And when I was introduced to the squadron commander, he looked at my records and he said, "I see you have

fifteen combat missions already.” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, I’ll see if I can get you credit for some of those missions.” Well, lo and behold, that never happened. But I was assigned to a crew as the left waist gunner on the B-17 called Lady Satan. And it was a very, very, very nice crew. And everybody was very cordial. After flying fifteen missions with an A20, for a total of maybe three hours a mission, my first mission in the B-17 was eleven hours and fifteen minutes. And at that time, that mission, we lost six airplanes out of our squadron, and, when we landed that afternoon, I got out of the airplane and walked to the tail, and I looked up at the sky and said, “Oh, Lord, did I do the right thing by requesting a transfer?” But as it happened, I think I did.

00;17;20 - 00;17;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Before continuing to talk about your missions in the B-17, can you just—to backtrack a little bit—can you talk to me about your experience in gunnery school and radio school?

00;17;38 - 00;17;40

MEL JENNER: I did not hear what he said.

00;17;40 - 00;17;45

DENNIS: He wants to know about your experience when you went to gunnery school and radio school.

00;17;45 - 00;19;13

MEL JENNER: In gunnery school when I went to Harlingen, that was all new to me. But I did real well. In fact, I was the top gunner in our school at that time when we graduated and on the board in operations, they had the names of all the best gunners that graduated, and my name was up on the board as one of the best. And of course, the radio operator school, I didn't enjoy the radio operator part of it because you had to take code. But I did get by and passed the radio operator school. But I flew forty six missions and never was the radio operator.

00;19;14 - 00;19;20

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What did you do to keep your body warm as a waist gunner flying in high freezing altitude?

00;19;20 - 00;20;48

MEL JENNER: In the B-17, the two waist gunner positions—the right and left—had a big window with a weapon in there, a .50 caliber weapon, and, it was cold. I can remember at 28, 29,000ft, it was sixty below zero. And of course, at that time, we had heated suits that sometimes didn't work. And, of course, we had other sheepskin lining flying suits and jackets and boots and gloves. But so many times our oxygen masks use to freeze up and the ice on the mask would freeze on our face. And of course, we'd have to break the ice so our oxygen masks would work.

00;20;54 - 00;21;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Walk me through your experiences flying to Berlin six times in those six missions.

00;21;00 - 00;23;11

MEL JENNER: Berlin was the most heavily guarded city in the world, I guess, at that time. And we went to it six times and there was a number of fighter bases around it and, of course, anti-aircraft was heavy. I can't say that we was never hit because almost every time we went, we were hit with anti-aircraft fire and fighters, but we were just fortunate enough not to suffer any losses at that time. And I was so very grateful that we could get by without suffering a loss. But it was just one mission after another, and you would look out to see B-17s that didn't make it and had to go into a spin and go down and we'd always look for parachutes and we'd count the parachutes and, of course, we reported the number of chutes that we'd see when an airplane was shot down and reported that to our intelligence officers.

00;23;11 - 00;23;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you share any other notable moments during your combat missions in World War Two?

00;23;18 - 00;27;44

MEL JENNER: I had a buddy that was in my A20 outfit and wherever we went, his name was Oscar McClure, he would go to the same places and the same schools that I did. And we just was good friends. And when I transferred to the B-17 outfit, and I had started flying, one morning, part of my crew was going to the mess hall, and we had a walk probably half a mile to the mess hall, and as I was walking along, I saw this guy coming toward us, and I said to the young fellow that was with me, "I know that man. He was my best buddy." And he said, "Well, how can you tell it?" I said, "I could tell by the walk." And sure enough, when it got closer, it was Oscar McClure, and he had been transferred to the 452nd also and was put on a crew as a ball turret operator. Well, Oscar was on his fourth mission, and I was on my tenth mission at that time in March of 1944. And as we was flying along our, my pilot and our crew was leading one of the squadrons, and of course, we had airplanes on our right and left wing and of course, on our tail. And Oscar was on our left side, and he could see me in the waste of our airplane. And he took his guns and waved them at me and just to say hello, I guess. And, about that time, we started getting some heavy, heavy, heavy flak and I ducked behind the firewall there a little bit to get out of the way of the window, but I was only a couple of minutes, and I turned around and looked out at that window again, and all I saw was a wing of a B-17 with two engines on it and engines still turning. I looked over and saw Oscar's airplane going into a spin, and I knew that he was in the ball turret. And I know that there was no way he could get out. So, I watched, and no chutes came out. And the airplane went through an overcast. And, of course, I lost sight of it then, but it was a terrible thing to see my best buddy go down. And I knew that it was his end.

00;27;44 - 00;27;55

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Your final B-17 mission was a photo recon over the Normandy beaches on June 6th, 1944. Can you share your perspective from that day?

00;27;55 - 00;32;06

MEL JENNER: I had completed my tour and was waiting just to go back to the States. And one evening, my pilot came into Quonset hut, and he said that he was looking for enough guys

for a crew on the B-17 to fly the next day. And he told me it was a top secret mission, and nobody would know about it, and it wouldn't be reported, he said, "but you don't have to go if you don't want to, so you have to volunteer." So I asked him, "Well, are you going to be the pilot? And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, I'll go with you as the waist gunner." But I was the only one from my original crew that volunteered to go on that mission. But my pilot got a crew together and we took off the next morning and went to France.

The North Sea and the [English] Channel was all filled was ships and boats and as we got closer to the shore line of France, you could see some of the guys that was in the water and going ashore. And we started flying up and down the French coast, the Normandy coast and after a period of a couple hours, we went back to Normandy and I could see some of our guys in the water, and they weren't moving and I called the pilot and I said, "Sir, haven't we seen enough?" And he said, "Yes, I think we have." But in the nose of our airplane was two colonels and they had some special photo equipment that they were using to take pictures of the landing and those going ashore, but they agreed that they had enough to take back to England. And so we turned around and come on home. But that was the most heartbreaking mission that I had ever been on. And I just can't believe some of the things that I saw but went through so many years without ever telling anybody about what had happened and what took place.

00;32;06 - 00;32;11

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why did you continue to serve in the military after World War Two?

00;32;11 - 00;37;10

MEL JENNER: Well, I got discharged in 1945. And I went to work, got married, but I wasn't satisfied. I missed being in the Air Force. So one day I was working for the Mississippi Power Company as a lineman and our secretary came to the back porch and called our names for our check on a Friday afternoon. And, of course, they called my name, and I went up and got my check. And as I walked away, the check was in my hand, and it didn't feel right. And I shuffled it through and found that there was two checks stuck together, and I looked at the other check and it happened to be my foreman. And I looked at what he got. And I know that he had about thirty years with the Mississippi Power Company. So when I went home that evening, I did some figuring and I told my wife on Monday morning, I'm going down to the recruiting office, and if they don't give me my stripes back that I had when I was discharged, I was going to go back in the service. She wanted to know why, and so we just talked it over and she said, okay, but she didn't think that they would give him my stripes back because at that time I was a staff sergeant. So I went back on Monday morning and went to the recruiting office and told the recruiting officer what I wanted. And he said, "Well, we don't need any gunners right now." But he said, "Is there anything else that you do?" And I said, "Well, I could be a mechanic." And he said, "Well, that's a little different." He said, "Yeah, he would try that." And sure enough, they accepted me as a mechanic. And so I was assigned to Keesler Field at that time. That was the beginning of my career.

And, thing is, I went through twenty one years and never told anybody that I was in World War Two or I was on a B-17 crew or...nobody knew about it. And they never asked me, so I didn't tell them. I made Chief Master Sergeant in April of 1966. And when I got discharged in 1968, I went to work out at Martin Marietta and I worked there building missiles for—Sandy missile—

until Martin Marietta lost their government contract and, of course, I was laid off, and I went to work for Walt Disney World as a painter.

00;37;10 - 00;37;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: One of your missions during the Cold War involved flying over Berlin to provide aid for the Blockade (1948-1949). Can you share with me your perspective on that mission.

00;37;23 - 00;42;11

MEL JENNER: Well, when I went back in the service, I was stationed at Edwards Air Force Base, and I was there two or three years. Anyway, I went to Japan and for Japan, I was in a 317th Troop Carrier outfit which was a C54. At that time, in 1948 and '49, the Berlin Airlift started. And I was sent from Japan to Germany and was stationed at a small German town called Celle, as an engine built up supervisor. And, in the meantime, I had flown some in C54, as a flight engineer. Every once in a while, somebody would come in and say, "Mel, you want to go to Berlin?" I said, "Sure. I'd take the truck with them." It was very touching because we had a number of airplanes that were dropping candy bars and some of the kids would catch candy bars with little parachutes on them. And I happened to meet one of them years later. Her brother had caught a parachute with a Hershey bar on it, and her first taste of chocolate was that day, and she was four years old. But she was going to a church here in Winter Garden, [Florida], and she had always wanted to meet a veteran from the Berlin Airlift, and on the back of my car, my wife took my car and went to church this one Sunday, on the back of my car was a license tag and on the frame of the tag said, "Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949." And when this lady saw this tag, she got all excited, went inside the church and asked the pastor if he knew who belonged to that red car, and he said "No," but he would find out. Well, they did, they found out it was my wife's car. And somebody had told her that I was in the Berlin Airlift. And we made arrangements to meet each other a couple weeks later, and it was very touching because I told this lady "I also dropped bombs." She said, "Well, it's a good thing you did because if it hadn't been for the Americans, we'd all I had to speak Russian." So anyway, that was very touching. And I enjoyed every bit of it.

00;42;11 - 00;42;20

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why didn't you tell anyone when you went back to the service, your crew members, that you served in World War Two?

00;42;20 - 00;47;42

MEL JENNER: Well, because I knew I had something wrong with me. Every once in a while, I'd break out in hives and my face would swell up and of course I had the usual nightmares. I went to a number of doctors, and they took blood work, and they could never figure out what was causing it. And then one day, somebody told me to go to the VA and see one of their psychologists to find out what was wrong with me. And I went to this VA office and was introduced to a psychologist, and he made arrangements for me to come back couple times a week, and we would talk and, finally he said to me after a number of weeks, he said, "I think we figured it out what's wrong with you." And I said, "Well, good. What is it?" And he said, "Well, you got PTSD." And I said, "Well, what in the world is that?" And he said, "Well, maybe you know it by another name like combat fatigue." I said, "It's been seventy years or more since

I had combat.” He said, “Well, that doesn't matter.” And he introduced me to the VA main hospital, and I could talk to them. And I went for seventeen years, every year, every week for seventeen years. And the whole group—there were twenty one guys in it. Most of them were Army and Marines and there was myself as the only Air Force guy and there was only one Navy guy there out of the twenty one. But gradually, one by one, they started passing away. And I ended up as the only one left and the person that was in charge of the hospital said they would keep on going with me and we'd have this meeting, but the guy that was in charge of them, of that office, retired. So that ended. It was wonderful because I started going to the First Baptist Church in Orlando and they had a veterans program one time, and they asked me to if I would participate. And I did, and I happened to mention something about PTSD. And one of the ladies in our church was a counselor and she called me and asked me if I would come in and talk to her. I did, and, after two or three months with her, I could tell the Oscar McClure story, which was something that I couldn't say in all these years and to this day it is a very wonderful, wonderful story. And I am just so grateful that to tell the truth while I'm still here.

00;47;42 - 00;47;47

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about Chuck Yeager.

00;47;47 - 00;50;55

MEL JENNER: When I went back, I was stationed at Edwards Air Force Base and Chuck Yeager at that time was flying the X-1, getting ready to break the sound barrier. And I was the crew chief on the B-36. And one day, Chuck come out to fly my airplane, and we had it all ready for this mission. And, of course, Chuck would have been the copilot, but he was sitting in the pilot's seat this day. And we got to the end of the runway and preflight it, and we started. We started going down the runway and for some reason, he worked the rudder pedals. And, of course, you know, the B-36 had a rudder pedals like two stories high. Anyway, the airplane started to leave the runway, and I called him on the phone, and I didn't have a very nice remark to him that day, but we straightened out, everything was fine. We landed back at the base, after we completed our mission. And I went up to Chuck, and I said I was sorry for what I said, and he said, “Well, it was something that he'd never should have done.” But anyway, I used to fly with Chuck in the B-29 when he would take off in the X-1. When we'd go to altitude, I go back with Chuck to his airplane, which was in the bomb bay of the B-29 and helped him get all buttoned up and locked in. And then I'd go back to the cockpit of the B-29, and we'd go on to fly to the altitude we were supposed to drop him at, and we did this a number of times, and even in 1947, when he broke the sound barrier.

00;50;55 - 00;51;03

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What was your experience like serving in the newly created Air Force Branch during the Cold War?

00;51;03 - 00;51;03

MEL JENNER: What was that?

00;51;03 - 00;51;12

DENNIS: What was it like serving in the Air Force, when it was first born?

00;51;12 - 00;51;13

MEL JENNER: When what?

00;51;13 - 00;51;16

DENNIS: When the Air Force first came to be?

00;51;16 - 00;52;30

MEL JENNER: Well, you know, the Army Air Corps was a wonderful outfit. And I enjoyed every bit of it, but it went on and then the next day, the Army Air Corps stopped, and the Air Force took over. And that was on September the 18th, 1947. My memory's not as good as it used to be. [**DENNIS:** You got it right.] But that was a wonderful thing. I think about it now, that I've been drawn a check from the Air Force ever since the Air Force became the Air Force.

00;52;30 - 00;52;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Your last duty station was in McCoy Air Force Base in Orlando, correct?

00;52;37 - 00;52;38

MEL JENNER: Right.

00;52;38 - 00;52;42

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How long were you stationed at McCoy Air Force Base?

00;52;42 - 00;54;00

MEL JENNER: I think three years. But I was in maintenance control to begin with and work myself up to be in charge of the planning and scheduling section and we were flying back and forth to Guam during the Vietnam War. I had made two trips to Guam and, of course, I had a young family, I finally I said, "Well. I've had enough," and I put in my paperwork to retirement. If I was young enough I'd go back in [the service] tomorrow if I could.

00;54;00 - 00;54;03

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What years were you in McCoy, those three years?

00;54;03;21 - 00;55;20;20

MEL JENNER: I retired in '68, so, in 1965. I had been to Clark field [Clark Air Base] in the Philippines for a couple of years, and we'd work on the airplanes that was flying—we never had any airplanes of our own, but Clark was a stopping point for many airplanes going into Vietnam. And every once in a while, an airplane would break down in Vietnam and we'd fix the airplane and then fly out with it that same airplane back to Clark and I did that a number of times.

00;55;20 - 00;55;25

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why were you stationed at McCoy?

00;55;25 - 00;55;29

MEL JENNER: Why what?

00;55;29 - 00;55;32

DENNIS: Why were you stationed at McCoy Air Base?

00;55;37 - 00;56;52

MEL JENNER: I guess it was my turn to be back in the States, because I had spent two or three years at Clark and I had a family that was going to school and they came to me and asked me where I wanted to go back to the States because it was time for me to return and I had always loved to bass fish, and I had read so many stories about bass fishing and outdoor life that I thought, "Well, if I get stationed back in Florida, I have a good time to go bass fishing." And that's exactly what I did.

00;56;52 - 00;56;59

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you talk to me more about your responsibilities at McCoy? From maintenance to schedule and planning?

00;56;59 - 00;58;14

MEL JENNER: I was in charge for a year or two. I was in charge of the planning and scheduling section. But from there, I moved up to the workload control they called it, I think, at that time, and I had a radio contact with the flight line and if any of the airplanes had maintenance problems they called the control room, and I would write a work order and send it to the shops that would send somebody out there to fix it. But it was because of my maintenance background that that worked out real well.

00;58;15 - 00;58;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And then when you moved up to scheduling and planning.

00;58;17 - 00;58;26

MEL JENNER: Yeah. Right.

00;58;26 - 00;58;34

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you describe McCoy when you were there, like, physically?

00;58;34 - 00;58;37

DENNIS: What did McCoy airbase look like when you were there?

00;58;37 - 00;59;24

MEL JENNER: Just like it looks like now. It was a big airfield. They had a civilian part of it on the other side of the field and, yeah, it was, a very outstanding airfield. And the B-52s, of course, took up a lot of the room there at McCoy.

00;59;24 - 00;59;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: In your mind, what was the purpose of McCoy Air Base?

00;59;32 - 00;59;37

DENNIS: What was the mission of McCoy Air Base?

00:59:37 - 01:00:16

MEL JENNER: To be ready. The B-52s, to be ready for any event. And we practiced it, we had drills and, it belonged to SAC. When I say SAC, the Strategic Air Command was in charge.

01:00:16; - 01:00:23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you share any other notable things that happened during your time at McCoy?

01:00:23 - 01:01:19

MEL JENNER: We lived on the base. We were housing in, and my wife and family were there. But I guess I just, the reason why I retired was I just had enough of going back and forth to Guam.

01:01:20 - 01:01:26

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Once you retired from the service in 1968, you stayed in Orlando?

01:01:26 - 01:02:23

MEL JENNER: Yes, I did. We bought a house right outside the base before I retired, but, after I retired, we stayed right there at the same place, and I went to work for Martin Marietta and then when I got laid off at Martin, went out to Disney and put in almost twenty years there.

01:02:23 - 01:02:26

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about the bass fishing club that you started.

01:02:27 - 01:03:52

MEL JENNER: Walt Disney World had a fishing club. And when I went to work for Walt Disney, I found out about the bass fishing club, I joined it. And after I was there for a year, they asked me if I would be the tournament director of the club, and I said, "Sure. What do I have to do?" And of course, all I had to do was run the tournaments, keep track of the tournament. And as time went on, the workload increased and I took care of all the records, all the names of everybody that fished and I did that for thirty five years, even after I retired, from Disney, they still kept me as a tournament director for the bass club.

01:03:52 - 01:03:55

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what were the tournaments like?

01:03:55 - 01:05:05

MEL JENNER: We had sometimes twenty five boats and of course, two men to a boat. And we would fish a different lake every month. And sometimes we would leave Orlando or Kissimmee and go for a two-day tournament to a city outside of them two areas. It was a very fun club. And anybody that liked to fish—we had the same members, most of the same members for many years.

01:05:05 - 01:05:13

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about the Osceola Bass Club.

01;05;13 - 01;06;58

MEL JENNER: After a period of time, the supervisors out at Disney came to our club. And, of course, we would fish with top supervisors for many years, but they'd come to our club, and they said that "if you didn't work at Disney, you couldn't belong to a club." Well, we had a couple of old time members that were not employed by Disney, and we would have to tell them guys that they couldn't fish with us anymore. So I had made up my mind we would just quit fishing Disney and make another club. And the guys that worked out at Disney, if they wanted to join our club, they could, and that's what happened. But the Disney bunch came over and fished with us, but they also fish with the Disney Club. So it made two clubs out of it.

01;06;59 - 01;07;07

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you did this job for Disney while you were a painter for them?

01;07;07 - 01;07;11

DENNIS: When did you do the Bass Club while you were painting for Disney too?

01;07;12 - 01;07;14

MEL JENNER: Yeah. Oh yeah.

01;07;14 - 01;07;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about the painting job at Disney.

01;07;16 - 01;07;32

MEL JENNER: Well yeah. During the week, I was a painter, and I wasn't paid for being the tournament director there.

01;07;32 - 01;07;36

DENNIS: Tell him how you got the job as a painter.

01;07;36 - 01;09;42

MEL JENNER: Well, when I worked in Martin Marietta, after I was laid off there, somebody told me to go out to Disney, and so I did, and I applied for a job as a welder. And then, they said, "Well, we don't need any welders." But he said, "We do need some painters, can you paint?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, have you ever painted your house?" And I said, "Well, I've done that." He said, "Well, you're a painter." And the boss came out to where I was sitting and he said, "Well, we were going to take a chance on you and see how everything work out." I said, "Fine." Well, six weeks later, they gave me a crew and assigned me to some area of the castle that needed painting and that's what happened. But I loved it. It was beautiful.

01;09;42 - 01;09;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you witnessed the expansion of Disney, correct? Since you started when Walt Disney World started in Orlando, right?

01;09;52 - 01;09;53

MEL JENNER: Right.

01;09;53 - 01;09;58

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you just talk to me about witnessing that?

01;09;58 - 01;10;04

DENNIS: How did you feel when Disney started expanding?

01;10;04 - 01;10;56

MEL JENNER: Wow. That was after my time. But I'll tell you, I could see the difference in the people that they were hiring. When I first started out at Disney, everybody took interest and was in their work and they wanted to do the very best they could. And they did. But later on, it seemed like everybody just had a job and that was it.

01;10;56 - 01;11;04

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What were the years you worked for Disney?

01;11;04 - 01;11;25

MEL JENNER: I think it was twenty years before. Well. 1988, I think I was when I retired.

01;11;30 - 01;11;39

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why was it important for you to return to Normandy on the 80th anniversary?

01;11;39 - 01;11;42

DENNIS: Why was it important to you?

01;11;43 - 01;11;43

MEL JENNER: Well...

01;11;43 - 01;11;46

DENNIS: To go back.

01;11;46 - 01;13;28

MEL JENNER: During the war in 1944, I had been to France twenty five different times, twenty five different missions. But I never set foot on French soil. We went back last June [2024] to France. I got a chance to walk on French soil and put my foot on it and walked the beaches of Normandy and that's exactly what we did. And I got some sand from the different beaches. I saw Omaha Beach and the five main beaches that we had troops landing at.

01;13;28 - 01;13;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why was it important for you to be there?

01;13;33 - 01;14;30

MEL JENNER: So many of our boys, so many of our boys gave their lives. And when we walked through the streets of Paris, the people were just wonderful to us. And they showed us so much love and respect that it was just something that I'll cherish the rest of my life.

01;14;32 - 01;14;44

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You have an extensive public presence. You do a lot of speaking at events. Why is it important for you to pass on your story?

01;14;44 - 01;14;49

DENNIS: Why is it important for you to pass on your story?

01;14;49 - 01;18;18

MEL JENNER: Well, I think our younger generation—I have been going to some of the schools. And I tell them a little bit, it all depends on the age group, but I tell them a little bit about World War Two, the Berlin Airlift and I feel that as long as I can do that, I'm able to do that, you would make a big difference in the student's life if they could hear from somebody that went through it. I remember one time we went to a school just before we went to France for and after I had told my story, I asked, if anybody have any questions they wanted to ask me. This little girl, she was about, I don't know, fifth grade, I guess, she raised her hand, and I asked her to come on up, so I could hear her talk, and she did. And, she said, "Mr. Jenner, can I get a picture with you?" Well, I said, sure, and we had our picture taken together, but it meant a whole lot to me because she could have asked me anything, but she wanted a picture. I have four great grandsons and one of them has gone with me in some of the parades that I've been in, and I've gone to the cemeteries and laid wreaths, and he's gone with me and helped me do that to, but it's so wonderful. And I'm just so happy that I'm well enough that I can do these things.

01;18;18 - 01;18;26

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: From your perspective, how has World War Two memory changed?

01;18;26; - 01;18;34

DENNIS: From your understanding, how has World War Two memories changed?

01;18;34 - 01;20;03

MEL JENNER: Well, I just think this. War is terrible. We've got to learn to do things with other countries and get along with other outfits and other countries without going to war, because the next the next war will be worse than World War Two because now they could shoot down some somebody in an airplane and not even see them. So it's unbelievable. We got to learn to live with one another. And I know it's going to be hard, but...

01;20;03 - 01;20;09

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has Orlando changed since you've lived here?

01;20;09 - 01;20;57

MEL JENNER: Well, of course, it has changed because we have so many people that has come into our country that shouldn't be here. And, I don't know, that has to be all worked out too. And I think our president is doing a real good job so far. And we're all very proud of him.

01;20;57 - 01;21;01

DENNIS: How big was Orlando when you first moved here?

01;21;01 - 01;21;49

MEL JENNER: How big was it? Well, that was 1965. So it wasn't as big as it is now, but I don't know. It was a nice place and nice and clean. We loved it. And we decided we was going to raise our family right here in Orlando.

01;21;49 - 01;22;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Mr. Jenner, those were all my questions. Thank you, number one, for your service. And thank you for taking sometime today to talk with me. I really appreciate it.

01;22;00 - 01;22;35

MEL JENNER: Like I said, I'm just so happy that I'm still here that I could pass on some of the things that has happened in my life. And I thank you for coming and doing it. I know that it's terrible to talk to an old guy that can't hear.

01;22;35 - 01;22;36

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: No no no no no. Thank you.