

Call number: 94-05-01 SIDE B

Name and place: Frank Nigro is interviewed by Margaret Van Cleve

Date: August 17th, 1993, at his daughter's house in downtown Fairbanks, Alaska.

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Notes: Original on a c-cassette tape, master copy on CD

Frank continues by telling how somebody offered him a job [hauling food off a Northern Commercial Company warehouse that was threatened by flood]. At that time, the NC Company sold groceries and liquor. That started Frank's working for the F. E. Company to whom he worked for several months. They paid him \$0.80 cents per hour and he worked 5 days a week, 8 hours a day. He was always going to a mining camp. Frank used to go to the Nordale Hotel because that's where all the miners used to live until they got taken out to the creeks. Frank had gotten a room from over the Finnish Bathhouse on 1st Avenue. He got a room there for \$12 dollars a month. The lady who ran it said Frank could take a Finnish bath any time he wants.

2:09 Frank got lined up with a fellow who had a contract to drill up at Caribou Creek, at Salcha River. They needed a man who could fire a boiler and keep the drill working. Frank took that job and got flown there. That was the first time he had ever been on a plane, and his pilot

was Herm [Herman] Joslyn. Frank smoked at the time and rolled his own cigarettes. He had taken a whole bag of tobacco and matches on the plane with him and they were in his gunny sack. He also had bedding because everything they had at the camp was beds, and one had to bring one's own sleeping bag.

They flew over the camp and the pilot showed Frank the area and where they would pick Frank up with one of those gold devils [go-devils] that were used to carry freight to the camp that was just a mile away. Gold devil [Go-devil] was a sled vehicle.

4:24 When they loaded up the plain at Week's Field, they could smell a little bit of smoke coming from the plane and Frank didn't know what was going on. Herm said that they had to take all the baggage out quickly, which they did, and sure enough the box of matches that Frank had with him had somehow lit up. That was Frank's bag where the smoke was coming from, but there was no fire really. They put everything back in the plane and flew to the camp.

Herm warned Frank about bears and when he dropped Frank off, he told him to stay by the field while waiting to be picked up. Herm started to take off but didn't have enough wind to lift the wings and he ended up at the edge of the field where it was all [unclear] and couldn't go any further. He stepped down and the propeller hit the gravel. Frank ran over and asked Herm if he can help. Herm instructed him to pick up the tail end of the plane and then push from the wings. Herm had to straighten out the propeller first.

7:18 Frank followed Herm's orders and pushed whenever Herm fired that engine and finally they got him back to the field itself. Herm turned the plane around and made another run for it, this time successfully.

Mike Erceg was a contractor on those claims for a company that was based in San Francisco. There were a lot of claims that were open. Every 50-feet they would sink a hole on the creek. Mike Erceg knew that nobody owned the adjoining claim and claimed it himself. Eventually the company found out what he was doing and shut down the operation and so Frank was out of job again. But he was making \$0.71 cents per hour and working 10 hours per day. They also fed him.

9:32 Frank worked hard in getting wood into the boiler. He also made sure that there was enough steam for the drill rig so the driller wouldn't have to wait for the steam to build up. The job lasted them for only a couple of months.

10:10 Frank went to find out if he could live in the same place where he had lived before and he could. The Finnish Bathhouse keeper's name was Mrs. Simpanen. She had two sons and one girl. Frank can't think of the name of the bathhouse.

There was a store next to it with a fellow who was selling GM cars, motors, and trucks. Frank stayed there for the winter and the following spring, 1939, during the carnival days [hesitates and discontinues the thought.] Frank tells that he used to go to the Nordale Hotel quite often. He got acquainted with one [unclear] there, Roy Blockhus, who was in charge of the clerks at the time.

12:18 They always had to shovel snow from the roofs since there was a lot of snow and Roy asked if Frank would like to help Adolph Stock who was the maintenance man at the hotel. Adolph needed help shoveling the snow from the roof and Frank agreed to do it. That's how he started working at the Nordale Hotel. They kept him as Adolph's helper after all the snow was shoveled.

In those days, train came in on Thursday and left on Saturday and every time the train came in, Frank helped to get the tourists to the hotel and carried their packages. Nordale didn't have an elevator and it had three stories and the suitcases were heavy as if they had rocks in them.

Frank stayed there until the war. In 1942, Frank enlisted at the field [Ladd Field, now known as Fort Wainwright] because he figured that they were going to draft him anyway. He had heard lots of stories about people who got drafted in Fairbanks. They were sent down to Anchorage for boot training and after that, they were sent to Aleutian Chain. At that time, the Japs were at the Kiska and Attu Islands. Frank heard a lot about the bad weather, the winds, and heavy rain, and that they could hardly see the sun.

14:45 They were still building the [Ladd] Field and there was not enough housing for all the officers who were coming up there, so Frank and the others took some of the officers to the hotel where they stayed until their housing was finished.

One evening Frank was working from 5pm to midnight. One of the fellows, a lieutenant, came into town just to get away from the field. He stopped at the hotel and Frank, who knew him, asked the lieutenant what would be Frank's chances for staying in Fairbanks if he enlisted. The lieutenant said that he works at the personnel and that if Frank comes to see him, he'll see that he's stationed in Ladd Field. Frank had to leave his boss a notice because he couldn't just leave the place without a clerk, gave the notice, and enlisted on December 4th. He was given three days to clear his business in town and report back.

16:22 It was a cold winter in 1942. They had a truck and the three or four of the men from the headquarters building were sent into the

camp where the barracks were. When they go into service, they take as little possessions with them as possible because they are given clothing and all that. It was cold, but Frank thought that he'll make it to the camp [without enough clothes on]. He jumped into the back of the truck that had a canvas on the back end and sat on the other bench. As the truck was going towards the camp, and they were parallel to the airstrip, he saw a plane going down the air strip and the pilot was making a lot of noise. There were flames coming from the back of the propel plane. They had B25s and B26s "here" and they were training pilots that came from Russia to fly planes to Siberia. They would fly the planes to front lines in Russia.

All the sudden the plane dove into the ground and killed a American instructor pilot and the Russian major who was in controls. Then the plane caught fire. As they were approaching the plane, the driver of the truck that Frank was on, slammed the breaks. He could see better than the men in the back who could only see from where the canvas overlaps [unclear]. Frank jumped out and wondered if there was ammunition on the plane, so he ran away, following the truck tracks.

20:32 Margaret asks how far Frank was from the plane and he tells that they were maybe 200 feet away. They finally got to a point where the truck was able to go by, and the truck took them into the camp where they stayed for 30 days.

In the early days, they were trained so that before they were released, they had to go to the firing range. It was so cold that they couldn't see the targets from the ice fog. One day they got down and temperature rose to -38 below zero and the sun was breaking in so they went to the shooting range. That day they did the firing, and the following day they

had to go get the targets so that the other guys could fire. Frank went there and could barely see the target but he made it. His fingers froze since he didn't have the right equipment. He had shoes and overshoes, but the overshoes froze and his shoes weren't the right size -- they were too narrow. Frank had put two pairs of socks on, knowing that he's going to be out all day, and he couldn't move his toes so they almost froze. They really hurt.

23:09 Frank got back to the camp and his toes really hurt when he took his shoes off. He knew that he had to do the same thing the following day so he went to the kitchen and asked them if they had any gunny sacks and he got one. Next day Frank put on two pairs of socks but no shoes and then he wrapped his feet with gunnysacks, and then put on the overshoes. He could feel his toes and was okay spending all day at the range, pulling targets for the guys that were shooting.

Margaret wants to know what they had to do to pull targets. Frank tells that he had to pull target out of the frame – they were 100 yards away from where they were shooting – and then, every time they stopped firing, Frank pulled the targets out and wherever the holes were, they'd paste them [fix the holes with tape or something similar]. They wanted to know how many shots were fired from each position [standing, kneeling, and laying down]. After all the firing was done, they were taken back to the camp and they were free to do whatever they were assigned to do.

25:45 The officers helped Frank out since he was assigned to a special duty. His job was to do the same type of work that he had done at the hotel. They had pilots coming from Great Falls, Montana, with their fighter planes and going to Canada, to Whitehorse, and to Ladd Field.

They didn't have a place to sleep and Frank's job was to see that they had a bed from non-commissioned officers' quarters for the pilots. If the weather was clear after a night at Ladd Field, the pilots would all go back to Montana, leaving the planes there.

If the weather was clear, the plains were given to the Russian pilots who would fly them across to Siberia. They took DC3 planes and ferried those back into Ladd Field with those Russian pilots. Lots of times they couldn't fly because of the ice fog.

Frank was there for 28 months.

28:22 The Russian pilots didn't have a club so they used the American officers' clubs and loved to play the slot machines. The Russians would eat at the same mess hall with the American officers and then they had nothing else to do. Then the Americans decided to make them their own little clubhouse with pool tables and many tables where they could play chess since they loved to play chess.

One day the captain who was in charge asked Frank to go to the Russian officers' club even though he doesn't speak Russian. Frank bought a dictionary for a \$1 dollar. He got along with those guys just fine. The Russians wanted to get some slot machines and asked Frank to ask for them in town.

30:55 There was a fellow in town who used to take tourists from Fairbanks to Valdez and he'd stop at roadhouses. Margaret asks if he was Bobby [Robert] Sheldon but Frank says that Bobby Sheldon was a postmaster there at the time. They would stop and put slot machines in the roadhouses. One day Frank contacted the person and asked if he wanted to sell a slot machine. He told that he's got three machines that

he would sell for \$100 dollars. Frank told about that to the captain at the post and was told to go to the office and talk with Ringstad who was on special duty. Margaret asks if it was Mark Ringstad but Frank tells that it was one of the other boys from the family, a nice guy. Ringstad wrote him a check and Frank bought the three machines, taking them to the Russian officers' club. The officers "went crazy." They played those machines constantly and the money was taken to operate the clubs.

33:27 Frank's job was to see that there were enough cigarettes, beer, candy bars, and change to supply the boys when they came in. He opened the club up around 5pm and closed around 11pm at night. He locked up, took all the cash, and took it to the main office of the Officers' Club. Then he'd tell what he needed and sometimes he had to go to the quartermaster to get candy and beer.

Those days they mostly got Olympia beer. They came in cases that were packed with saw dust. Frank sold it for \$0.10 cents per bottle. The candy bars were sold for a nickel and cigarettes were also a nickel. Frank's orders were to not sell anybody more than two packages of cigarettes a day and two candy bars. They rationed.

Frank learned quite a bit of Russian and tried to converse with the boys whom were young like him. They were young pilots, good guys. Some of them spoke a little English, but Frank was always out with the dictionary and they enjoyed that.

36:09 One of those pilots took off normally one morning but found out that he was running out of oil or something. He radioed the tower but he spoke broken English and Russian so the tower couldn't understand

him. They finally cleared him for landing but he came down too low and hit the bank of the Chena River by the airport and got killed.

They had a man who was working with the Russians. After the accident he came to talk with Frank and told Frank that he had liked the pilot who crashed very much. He asked if Frank would like to have his boots but Frank didn't want them because he was superstitious. That boy had tried to learn more English by conversing with Frank.

Sometimes they asked Frank to leave the club house because they wanted to talk about something private and thought that Frank was learning Russian too fast. Frank left, and right next to the club there was a room where he could lay down and take it easy before they would knock on the door when they were through with their business. Then Frank would open up the bar again.

39:22 Margaret asks where the building was in relation to [unclear]. Frank tells that it was close to one of the [unclear] buildings. They put the Russian officers' rooms upstairs and after they left, the rooms were given to NCO's, Non Commissioned Officers.

[End of the recording.]