

## Gilbert Langdon Sr.

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**Question:** All right. So bathroom in the service. Tell me about that.

**Answer:** Okay. When we were stationed in England, at this Hundredth Bomb Group, it was an old English base. It had been built to take care of dirigibles. Okay. The hangers were huge where you could put this dirigible in a hanger. But they also had what they called a honey bucket house by each barracks where you could go potty in this honey bucket and there was a farmer that would come and gather this stuff up every once in awhile and take it out and put it on his fields. And the -- when the wind was right, it was hard to live in England. But you could -- there's -- two -- two ways that you can go when -- you can be scared shitless, okay. Or you can get the shit scared out of you. It just depends on where you stand, right. I had a buddy that was my closest friend, not the Indian, but on the crew, was scared shitless. And he couldn't go. I mean it was days and he couldn't go. And he'd go to this honey bucket house every morning and do his damndest and nothing happened. He was in the honey bucket house one morning and we had a red alert which means somebody's going to come and bomb us or shoot us up or something, you know. So out behind the barracks, in between the barracks and the honey bucket house, is a slit trench, that the British made, lined with bricks and flowers and, oh, it's a first class outfit, you know. So I -- a beautiful sunny day. And I went to the slit trench, and I got my cigarettes, I'm having a cigarette, you know. The hell with it -- I'm -- I'm safe here, you know. And a P-51, you know what a P-51 is? One of our -- he come along hedge hopping. Must have been looking for whoever was going to attack the base. And he had to climb to get over that honey bucket house. You know, and about 30 seconds later, here comes my buddy out, buttoning up his pants, with the biggest smile on his face you ever saw. He said -- he said when that plane roared over that honey bucket house, he got all done being constipated. (laughs) That was the nicest thing that ever happened to him. Why, he had a smile on his face a foot wide.

**Question:** Send that pilot a thank you letter.

**Answer:** Yeah, really.

**Question:** See, those are the -- you had some funny things. Those are the things the history books leave out are -- are the average every day things in there that -- you had a lot of different things you were fighting.

**Answer:** Can I tell you another story that has some humor?

**Answer:** Sure.

**Question:** Okay. We had a guy in our barracks that was the right height for a belly gunner, about 5'4", okay. Broad shouldered, Scandinavian, beautiful physique with 5'4". We had these one piece coveralls that we worked in, green, you know, what we called the mucky-dung shit-colored green. Okay. And we wore them out. Because the only place you could wash them was in hundred octane airplane gas. Slosh them all out in a wheelbarrow and hang them up and hope the stink blew out of them, you know. Well, eventually they got stitched up and sewed up where they were just basically rags. And they finally -- in the supply comes a supply of coveralls. And they're large, long, okay. So this guy gets a pair of coveralls, this 5'4" guy. And he's -- he's as pissed off at the whole world as everybody else is, you know. And he rolls the legs of these coveralls up to where when he's got them on, his feet stick out. And the crotch of these coveralls is dragging on the ground with this great huge roll of-- of leg on each side, you know. And I walked behind him when he walked -- he walked to the mess hall deliberately so everybody would see him -- the officers, you know, the big shots, look at what I got, you know. And I walked behind him. If I could have had a movie of that, you know, Disney would have paid me a small fortune to see this guy walking

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down the street with them coveralls. He had to walk like this with his legs, you know, like he pooped his pants. He just -- but to see his feet sticking out of the crotch of them overalls was one of the funniest things I ever saw. (laughs) But anyway, there wasn't too much humor but when it was funny, it was real funny.

**Question:** Did you guys fly every day or were you flying every other day?

**Answer:** No, not every other day. We flew -- they had what they call Big Week where they flew -- our group flew every day for seven or eight days and we flew every day for seven or eight days. I forget now what it was. But that was the exception rather than the rule. The weather would shut it down in the wintertime a whole lot. And losses would shut it down and lots of -- lots of extenuating stuff. But when Big Week made history, and it's in the history books, Big Week. But I really have forgotten when it was, but it was -- it was some -- was a really vengeful attack on the German business.

**Question:** How did you pass time then in between --

**Answer:** I played poker. I played poker every night for nine months. Or every night I was available. Never lost. Not one night did I come out losing. I lived through the war. I think I was one of the luckiest guys alive. (laughs)

**Question:** Were you playing for smokes or money or --

**Answer:** No, money, we played for money, yeah.

**Question:** In the barracks?

**Answer:** Yeah, in the barracks, yeah.

**Question:** What did guys talk about, do you remember?

**Answer:** Women, going home, cars. You know I had a 1928 4-door Model A sedan. You got any idea what that is? That was my first car.

**Answer:** I had a early '29-A pickup.

**Question:** Yeah. It was a beautiful car. And my girlfriend at the time made slipcovers for it. And you could get one of these skeleton heads for the end of your gearshift handle, you know. And if you had -- you could buy suppressors, you could hang a radio under the dashboard, remember? And you could have a manifold heater where you opened this little door and all the heat from the manifold blew in? It'd cook your girlfriend's legs off and you'd freeze your ass off over here, you know. But it was my first car. It was absolutely awesome. I -- if I had it now it would be worth a half a -- it would be worth fifty grand if I had it now, you know. I paid \$35 for it.

**Question:** So you were just average American kids.

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. I guess so.

**Question:** Talking about, I mean, the things that -- girlfriends back home, girlfriends they wished they had, girlfriends they'd been dumped by --

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**Answer:** Yeah, absolutely. It was nothing -- I don't know. It doesn't seem like there was anything spectacular going on in America to talk about. It was the Depression, you know. If it wasn't for the war -- World War II, we'd probably still be in a Depression. And the world, you know. It changed. I remember a guy coming to my house when I was about 10, a salesman, to sell my father stock in a supermarket. I think it was Safeway but I'm not sure. And it was about two or three dollars a share at that time. And my father's answer to this guy, and I remember this, a woman likes to be waited on. She's not going to take a cart through a supermarket and wait on herself. Who the hell are you trying to kid with this idea? You know, I don't know how many times Safeway stock has split, and it -- (laughs) But this was -- this was the way. When we went -- I went to the store most of the time with my bike and the basket on the front. Hand the grocer the list and he put it in a sack and I took it out and put it in my -- never touched nothing, man.

**Question:** Kept the tab running.

**Answer:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Question:** Yeah. Huh.

**Answer:** You went to the grocery store, you went to the meat market, you went to the -- to the bakery, you didn't go to a supermarket.

**Question:** And I hope you didn't take stock advice from your dad.

**Answer:** Well, (laughs) I had a little stock years ago but I managed to dissipate it, you know, so.

**Question:** When you were in England, when you had time off, did you get R&R to go into the -- to town or did you have to stay on base all the time?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah, yeah. No, we went to town. London. I visited London a lot. Yeah. London's a fascinating, beautiful town. And there was a guy -- we used to stay at a Red Cross club which was a hotel, I forget the name of the hotel now, but the Red Cross took over this hotel on Piccadilly Circus, okay. You know what Piccadilly Circus is? Okay. This guy had a horse and an open wagon that would seat six guys in this wagon besides him on the -- on the front seat. And you could take his wagon and he would tour you wherever you wanted to go in London. Like I say, 54 square miles, man, that's a hell of a big city, you know. And apparently my heritage is from England. So we rented his wagon. Well he liked us very much and we -- from -- from our description of the cat and the figure 13, he painted it on the side of his wagon -- both sides of his wagon. His name was Harry Walters. And he was a neat old -- well, I say neat old guy, you know. He was in his 60's. Ran this wagon and there was occasions when he'd get his wife and she'd sit on the front seat with him and away we'd go, you know. And we saw stuff in London that I don't think the average guy. I've been in Westminster Abbey when you could walk into the crypts, you know. And the stone steps are worn where these -- I don't know how many hundred years of monks have been going up and down these steps. And St. Paul's Cathedral. Up in the very top dome part there's a walk around here that they don't let you go in anymore. But I've been up there, and it's -- the acoustics are so phenomenal that you can stand on one side and whisper and the guy on the other side can -- can hear it.

**Question:** Wow.

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**Answer:** It's awesome, man, awesome. And the oldest pub in London was made out of pewter. Had a couple of drinks there, (laughs) or two (laughs).

**Question:** Yeah, I was going to say, define a couple.

**Question:** Did you forget the war when -- when you would go into London? Was that far enough away that you could put it away and --

**Answer:** It was okay if they didn't come over and bomb London that night. That made a difference. And they had these balloons hanging over London. Barrage balloons they called them, with great steel cables hanging down on -- on each one of these balloons. All over London, like so many balloons on a kid's party. But that was so the planes couldn't fly in there at that altitude -- and I forget how high these balloons were but they were real high. So they couldn't fly over this part of London because they'd run into these cables and do themselves in. And the English, all their Air Force defense stuff was in the subway system in -- in England. Way down. They -- their subways run at different elevations. It was a very intricate, beautiful system. And they got down as far as they could go and still have it function in case they got bombed, it would still be there. And it was a fascinating thing. And there was any number -- hundreds of hundreds of people lived in the tubes, they call it a tube. And they'd have a place cut off from the rest of the place with a tarp like, bunk beds in there. Families who had lost their homes that didn't have some place to go out in the country would just move into the subway. And there was hundreds of people living in those subways. Just like so many moles. But it was fascinating to see. It really was. It was -- it was interesting. It was.

**Question:** Do you remember any holidays while you were over there, like Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Easter?

**Answer:** No, I don't think so. I don't remember any in particular. No. I can't. I remember when -- when my crew went home. And I got a leave from the base I was teaching at. I went into London and here was this guy with the wagon. With our thing on it. So he and I went out pub crawling. He was as sympathetic with my loneliness as I was. So we went out -- we went out and found a -- we found a bar that had some American booze in it. And so we very selfishly drank all of it we could drink. And we both got pretty sloshed and for this old guy was pretty -- it was something else if he got sloshed, you know. So anyway we -- we came out and there was a -- you know what a U -- V-2 rocket was? Okay, there was one coming over. And the horse was having a fit. We had it tied outside here at a hitching post. And it was -- it was just having a fit with this screaming of the rocket and the air -- the -- sirens going off and all that kind of stuff, you know. So I remember holding on to the bridle and trying to calm the horse and he kind of halfway knew who I was. He'd rare up and I'd pull him back down again. And eventually the -- I didn't -- I was at the point where I didn't care where the God-damn thing landed. And it landed far enough away where it just made a big noise, you know. A concussion. So we got in the wagon, we're going to go home, to his home. And he couldn't find it. He -- you know, he lived in London all his life and he was so disoriented with the booze and one thing and another that he couldn't find it. And a milkman came by with a horse and wagon, you know. So I flagged him down. Could we -- you know, how close was his dairy. Could I take this horse and wagon over there and bed the horse down? Well he was sympathetic to the cause, and sure. So we bedded the horse down in this dairy and called a taxi. The average American had more money than anybody else over there as far as the war -- they didn't get paid much, you know, so. So anyway we did that and went to his home. And he and his wife slept under a great big oak table, they had a mattress on the floor under this oak dining room table. And they had a couch and had a little -- turned around to where the back was out and the cushions were -- on against the wall, you know.

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And so we bedded down there. And I woke up to an explosion outside. It didn't break the windows but it made the shade flap in the window, woke me up. And he's standing in the doorway, offering me a cup of tea, which, you know, they -- almost did me in. (laughs) I don't mean to belittle his drinking habits but tea was not what I needed at that moment. (laughs) But it was -- it was fun experience. It was different.

But I saw a lot of things in London that I never would have seen without him. The Tower of London and all that kind of stuff, you know, and fascinating city, really an awesome city.

**Question:** Did you usually travel in your uniform or your civvies?

**Answer:** Oh, no, we always had uniforms. We couldn't travel in civvies. No, we -- we -- we went in uniforms, yeah.

**Question:** Did that gain extra respect in London? Were they glad you were there?

**Answer:** Well, it depended on how you behaved. There was a lot of guys that would become very arrogant and a pain in the ass, you know, and -- and I don't think I was, but I had a lot of -- made a lot of neat, you know, a lot of -- nobody ever ran me off. They were always interested in -- if I was interested, they were interested in my interest, you know. It's -- to me it was fun, neat place. I enjoyed it very much.

**Question:** Do you feel that England was as unified as the United States or did they look at us as --

**Answer:** They were unified, you bet. When they -- when they -- when one of their soldiers stationed in England went home on a leave, he came home with every piece of artillery he owned. Rifle, bandoleer of bullets, hand grenades hanging off this thing. And if London was attacked, physically attacked, he was supposed to stand there and fight, just like they are in Switzerland. Everybody in Switzerland over the age of 18, up to 18 or 16, to 60 or so, is in their Army. And they all have their guns at home and that's where they stand to fight if they get invaded. So I think London was -- or England was on the same -- same -- same situation. But it was a fun -- it was different.

**Question:** When you look back, are you glad you decided to go in?

**Answer:** Oh, absolutely, yeah. I spent an awful long time being scared. But I -- I wouldn't trade it for nothing. Not anything. And I had a -- and I made a contribution toward ending this stupid war. However small, it was my contribution and I could be proud of it. And really, you know. No, I'm not sorry, no, hell no.

**Question:** Do you remember where you were when you heard that the bomb had been dropped?

**Answer:** I sure don't. I never have thought of that, no. You mean Hiroshima or Pearl Harbor?

**Question:** Hiroshima

**Answer:** What about Pearl Harbor -- do you remember where you were?

**Answer:** No, I don't, I don't remember. I know that I wanted desperately to go -- when I finished a tour I England, I wanted desperately to go fly a tour in the Pacific so I could shoot at a Jap. I really -- my thing was shooting at a Jap. And they put me in the gunnery school,

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Army, teaching over there. And then when I got back to the States, finally, they put me in Laredo, Texas in the gunnery school down there teaching people that really -- I didn't want to be down there. I wanted -- I did everything but beg them to send me to Japan. They say, no, we're going -- you're going to teach -- you know shit about this gun. We're going -- (laugh) So, you know, I would have loved to have gone to the Pacific. I wanted to be a tail gunner on a B-25 is what I wanted to be. But it didn't work out that way. But that's okay, too.

**Question:** What was the best part of being in the Service?

**Answer:** I don't really know what would be the best part.

**Question:** What about the worst?

**Answer:** I think seeing all the death. You know. An awful lot of death. I think they lost 25 or 28,000 guys in the 8th Air Force. Just in the 8th Air Force. And -- I saw -- for me it was a terrible thing to watch a B-17 go down. And that's what we always said, you know. If somebody didn't come back, they went down. We didn't say they were killed or prisoners of war or nothing, they just went down, that's all. Somebody come up missing, they weren't -- they went down.

**Question:** That's how you survived.

**Answer:** I think so, yeah. It's the only defense you could have, really. But there was an awful lot of death.

**Question:** Thank you very much.

**Answer:** It's my pleasure. Are you happy with this?

**Question:** Oh, yeah. I'm learning all sorts of, oh that's one question I forgot. In your turret, where is that belt of ammo?

**Answer:** Up here in a tank. It's in a -- there's a box up here in the -- in the tank, and it's all laid in here in such a fashion. One side feeds one gun and one side feeds the other. Metal links, have you ever seen a belt of ammunition? Okay, they're metal links, and there's a little chute where when you -- when your link is ejected, it's supposed to go out of the turret into the air, I guess, and disappear. And like I say, there was times when I shot so fast it didn't eject properly. So they'd be -- they'd gather up on this little window, if I was shooting down. And sometimes I'd have to shoot with one hand and grab the links with the other hand and stuff them in this little chute so I could keep seeing out the window, you know. But, you know, you have to improvise, I guess a little.

**Question:** Cause I imagine anything loose, you're flying around and if you're --

**Answer:** There's nothing loose in there, no you believe there's nothing loose in there. No, no, no. Nothing loose.

**Question:** I heard this saying but it must -- that "the whole nine yards" -- that that comes -- I don't know which point it was -- the ammo was nine yards long so they'd say you put the whole nine yards in.

**Answer:** I don't know. I don't know where that came from. We used to put it in by the box full. It comes in a box. The armorer was a -- was a good friend. That worked on the

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ground, you know. So anything we needed, why he was -- he was more than willing to help us with. The mechanic, master mechanic over the plane was a great big guy from West Virginia

**Answer:** Are you ready for this? You want some more?

**Question:** Yeah.

**Answer:** Okay. He was a good master mechanic. Ran a good crew. And he went into this little town of Dickleburgh which was the nearest little town outside, and got in the pub and got sloshed and some people give him some -- a bunch of shit. He threw a couple of natives out through the front window of the pub and got his ass in a crack and the MPs arrested him. And the townspeople wanted him crucified. Absolutely crucified. And he's -- and they insisted on it. They'd come out to the base and -- so you know what a general orders is when an Army and (inaudible) So here comes the general orders. Master Sergeant Riffle is hereby reduced to the grade of private, forfeits all pay and whatever, went on and on and on. And then they start with other things, you know, the mess hall needs this and whatever, whatever, and something else. And way down at the bottom of this page it says Private Riffle is promoted to the rank of sergeant -- but the townspeople never read the whole thing. They were satisfied with the top -- the top paragraph, you know. They busted that son of a bitch. So -- the Air Force took care of this sergeant. I used to have that general order but I somehow got it misplaced. But it was -- it was fun to have.

**Question:** Did you usually come back empty, your ammo?

**Answer:** No. No, there was a lot of ammo in there.

**Question:** Oh, really.

**Answer:** Yeah, and I never came - a dogfight only lasts seconds, just seconds. It only lasts seconds. And I had -- this buddy of mine that was in Viet Nam says a fire fight on the ground -- it only lasts seconds. It seems an eternity, you know, but it only lasts just seconds. I don't see, you know, a fox hole -- fox hole warfare, where a guy got in a fox hole, like you say, and stayed there for days on end, I don't think that happened much, you know. There was something -- something moving, apparently. You know. So, I don't know. Never happened to me, anyway. So.

**Question:** Like you said, they were coming at you at "X" speed and you're going "X" speed so --

**Answer:** Yeah, right. If you -- if it's coming head on, you can imagine what it's like. And if your guns are only accurate to a thousand yards, you can imagine what a short period of time he's going to be in range of those guns, you know. Even if, as he goes by, you can spin fast enough to get around, it's only seconds. Just seconds. Course you can spray an awful lot of ammunition out of a caliber 50 in seconds, but even so. I think if they're tuned up right, they -- 2700 a minute or something like that. So. It was some weapon. Awesome weapon.

**Question:** Well, great. Thank you.