

Bill Merifield

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Question: Back on here. So we were talking about -- in battle. You're up in the air --

Answer: The air environment.

Question: Standing --

Answer: Yeah, well, there again I think we were talking about the length of time --

Question: That's right, yeah.

Answer: And I think as -- you can frequently from the time that -- the time that they wake you up in the morning which is usually by flashlight, somewhere between 3:00 and 4:00 o'clock in the morning, and incidentally, when they do this, even before they wake you up, you know you're going out on the mission because what they call putt-putts -- what they used to start the engine of aircraft, charge the batteries and so on. Those things are running right along. And you hear bomb carts going in and out with the bombs and you hear gas trucks going out. So you pretty well know you're going to go. It's just a question are you going to stand down, or will it be your crew who will go. And one, you had mixed feelings about it. One, you wanted to get it over with and get home. And on one hand you're saying, gee I hope it's me. On the other hand you're saying, boy, I hope I'm not called. And as a standard rule, the first thing you get up and you do, you open the barracks and look at the weather. What's it like outside. That's the first thing you do.

And then there was a lot of little things that -- human things that are sort of interest... some guys would get up from a mission. Actually, you sit down and start playing poker. Even though the mission was about -- and they hadn't had breakfast yet. In fact they weren't even fully -- they'd sit down. There was two guys in our barracks that would do this all the time. I guess it's there way of alleviating tension, I don't know. Then we would go down to breakfast and, breakfast left a lot to be desired. It was certainly not Maxine's -- I'll tell you that. For the most part it was powdered eggs, Spam, coffee and in '43, they used salted lard for butter. We didn't -- a lot of our supplies were going to the bottom because of the U-boat scores. So the food for the most part was --. And then -- then they would give us brussel sprouts which is the worst thing you can eat when you're flying. Because your -- high altitude, you build up a lot of gas. And you can go on and on there.

Question: What was a meal that you looked forward to? Or was there a meal that you looked forward to?

Answer: (laughs) Yeah off base, we used to go to -- there was a little town called Oundel which -- I was stationed outside of an area called Peterborough, which is in the middle. And Oundel -- in Oundel there was a restaurant, where to be quite honest, we could get a good black market price breakfast or meal. Almost anytime. Can I break in here for a second?

Question: Yes.

Answer: Wally, did you ever go to that one?

OMV: Yeah.

Answer: You know the one I'm talking about?

OMV: Yeah, I know which one.

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Answer: Okay.

OMV: Really, you didn't think about eating.

Answer: Not really.

OMV: If anything, you didn't want to eat. You got up too early in the morning to want to eat, and when you got back at night, you were too damn tired to eat.

Answer: Right. I think the biggest thing I looked forward to was that shot of scotch.

OMV: Yeah.

Answer: Yeah, we got -- when we got back from a mission, we would go through what they used to call an intelligent.. -- or we used to call them hot news flash in which you were supposed to report all the wonderful things you could see at 30,000 feet. You know, you tried to observe the Wehrmacht at 30,000 feet, no way you're going to do it. So what you might report is, like for example, towards the end of my missions, the first jet -- we saw the first jet, which I had never seen before. Of course that was hot news. But anyway they gave us a shot of scotch when we got back and that, I found, quite relaxing. And we'd -- we'd listen to some of the inane questions that the so-called -- we used to call the intelligence officer the Group Stupe. (laughs) In fact that was -- do you remember that Wally?

OMV: Yep, I'd forgotten all about that.

Answer: So did I till just now. But in any event we used to -- anything we observed, unusual or unique in German technology we were supposed to report.

Question: Just a real brief tour of your base. What did your base look like where you lived and --

Answer: Well, it was a place called Polebrook. We were on the Rothschild Estate in England it was. Our living quarters were all Quonset huts. There were three big -- three or four -- I think three -- three big hangers and the rest of the field was all hard stand. It was all macadam runways. Then there was a mess hall and a shower and not very prosaic, really, come to think of it. Just a base. It was a counter -- probably a carbon copy of about every other base. There was a control tower on the base and that pretty well governed our air life, air control. On the ground for the most part. We were 12 miles to town. We got into town any way we could. I usually hitchhiked. We went on a bus, or we all had bicycles. And that was a 10 mile ride into Peterborough, that was too far, but we would frequently go into a smaller town called Oundel.

Question: Probably a harder ride, after a few beers or whatever.

Answer: Well, I tell you, bear in mind, everything was -- there was a blackout throughout England at that given point. And as a general rule, I look back at it, what a primitive life. But you know, I do have one thing to say about the English. How much I admire them. They were very courageous, very generous people. What little they had, they very willingly shared with us. They were courageous people -- had been in this quite a bit of time, longer than we had. They started theirs in '39. But they were excellent people.

Question: Now would you usually going on a mission every day or --

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Answer: No, -- you couldn't go every day. There's no way you could. First, no way a human being could take that. A mission, sometimes, the weather determines, particularly in the winter. The winter and even the spring and the fall, if you have ten-tens clouds, then you can't bomb an occupied target. Occupied, I'm referring to France, Belgium, the lowlands. With ten-tens, you can't bomb through that. So you would go over with a primary target and then if you couldn't bomb that, then you would have a target of opportunity. Something that you could get to -- could bomb. But you didn't bomb an occupied country with ten-tens clouds, because the casualty rate the civilian population would have been too -- would have been adverse. And there's no use generating ill will from the people that you're bombing when you're after the enemy.

Question: Did you ever come back with your bombs? Or did you --

Answer: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Question: Oh, you did.

Answer: Yeah, a lot of times you get -- or a lot of times when you take off on a -- the thing of it is, when you get ready to go out on a mission, you've got pins in the bombs and you've got to pull those pins because what they do is they -- ultimately when the propeller goes around the bombs, it drops rings off and exposes the fuse. But if you find -- but before you drop your bombs, you can still put your pins back in. So there was occasion that we had to do that. I think there were several. And you don't get credit for that unless you're (inaudible) when you get back, so there would be a lot of aborts, too, for whatever reason. Sometimes we -- we never did know why we aborted but we got a recall from the ground.

Question: What did you do in between missions? I mean, first of all, were you scared all the time? I know up flying --

Answer: It's in the back of your mind all the time.

Question: When you're at camp.

Answer: Yeah, it's in the back of your mind, but you know, you have to develop some survival defense mechanisms. And the first thing you do is you just shut that part of the war out. I mean, whatever you're doing, you're doing now is life. It's life. But you -- you feel sometimes like a condemned prisoner that ultimately may get the chair or whatever. It's not a comfortable way to be. And you develop a kind of gallows humor to survive so that you become rather impersonal when you see some pretty catastrophic things, you know. You -- just so much the mind can take, really. And your defense mechanisms are designed primarily to protect your ego from damage and you develop those things very quickly. And certain things -- and you talk them out. That's one thing about it. I think it was very therapeutic, combat crews -- air combat crews -- would consistently talk. Re-live and re-live and re-live so that the event that they're describing, irrespective of how catastrophic the individual did get rid of it. He talked it out. So to that degree I suppose it was hygienic.

Question: What did you do to make your base home or bring a sense of normal life? Or did you do anything like that? I mean, between missions.

Answer: Well, there's not a heck of a lot you can do in a Quonset hut. The only thing -- the only particular pleasure that I had -- at first we didn't have a mattress on our bed. We had three pallets, which are the worst things in the world to sleep in because if you move

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around, one of the pallets would drop on out, you know. So anyway I went down to the parachute shop where we had all of our optional work taken care of, and I had the guy sew them together and I got ahold of a GI mattress cover, covered that on up and then later on I got some cotton padding and I -- I made that pretty comfortable. In fact, people were saying, hey, Bill, if you get shot down (laughs). That's what I mean by gallows humor.

Question: What about -- I assume you were over there for Christmas?

Answer: Yeah. I went over in -- let's see I think my first mission was in -- I believe it was in July or August. I'm not sure, it's obscure. We went through the holidays with Christmas. Christmas didn't make a great deal of difference. It was a seven day a week war. I mean it was not -- if you stand down or you have bad weather, we could get leave. And after every so many missions we'd get what they call a flak leave. And you could go up to place called Bournemouth in England or different recreational areas. I went up to Scotland quite a bit. Spent most of my time in upper Lochloman. I liked it because the scenery was quite attractive and I like to fish. So I fished Lochloman. I never caught a darn thing, but I fished it.

Question: So now what major -- what major theatre did you fight in?

Answer: Europe. Hm-hmm. It was all Europe.

Question: How do you apply to the monument that's going to be built?

Answer: My involvement in it?

Question: Yeah. Well, I mean, what I'm saying is, what you did in the war, when I go to that monument, where could I look and say --

Answer: Well, probably, if we were to break it down by theatre, would be France. Probably and Europe. European Theatre. Generally on the monument itself there are two air battles that I would like to see memorialized. And this is the reasoning that I wanted Wally to come -- actually to become part of this. He flew probably one of the most catastrophic missions the 8th Air Force had, and that was the ball bearing plant at Schweinfurt. And there were two battles that I hope to see covered on the monument. And the one, the Ploesti mission over Romania, and the Schweinfurt mission over Germany. Other than that, I think it's more important, to be quite honest, that we get those, because we have adequate air coverage, you know. And I would to see those two missions covered.

Question: Did you know -- and I asked John this question earlier. Did you realize you were part of history while it was going on?

Answer: I don't think I was that objective about it. I think there were certain things that we realized would be -- maybe monumental. But no, I really can't say that I did. Because you bear in mind that all of us were in our early 20's at that point, and at 20 history was a subject you tried to avoid.

Question: Where were you when you heard the war was over?

Answer: In Lowry Field. Lowry Field, out in Colorado.

Question: And what went through your mind at that time? You had been through all these battles --

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Answer: Well, at that time I wanted to go to college on the GI Bill. I heard about the GI Bill and I began to psychologically program myself for this, so when the war was over, I -- well, the first thing is, yeah, I survived. The biggest thing that -- oh, we were concerned about. When we were being -- we went to Lowry Field. This was a B-29 base. And they were talking about giving us another tour in the South Pacific, and at that given point, no way. Some people volunteered for a second tour, but I'm not made of that kind of courage. (laughs) One's enough.

Question: What do you think your message would be for generations to come?

Answer: Be knowledgeable about history. The concern that I have is if they're not aware of the ultimate catastrophic message of history, they're doomed to repeat it. I think that -- also I would like younger people to recognize -- to become geopolitically quite sensitive to what's going on in Europe. Europe, the rest of the world. What will happen to third world powers that now have nuclear capabilities? My concern is that maybe there are better alternatives to war and if education can provide them, that should be a major effort. Is helping children discover alternatives to violence.

Question: Are you -- are you proud to have served?

Answer: Under the conditions of that time, yes. Considering this was a world that was literally torn apart, yes, I was.

Question: And this is a question that I think kids often have and we get lost in them and it's even debate on building a war monument. You know, is it a memorial, is it glorifying war and all that?

Answer: No, there's nothing -- there's no glory in war. There's no -- if there's glory in war I've yet to discern it. War for the most part can be something that a series of circumstances forced upon you or forced upon the world. But unless we understand, again the message of history. The Treaty of Versailles was the midwife of World War II. And the kinds of things that we failed to do rather than the things that we did were instrumental in bringing on the war. I don't want to see the world go through this again.

Question: Do you harbor animosity towards the -- the people that you fought against?

Answer: No way. I can recall one time we were talking. We went over to Europe a few years ago and we met -- we met some individuals from the German Air Force, through the 8th Air Force Association that I belonged to, and I think we all collectively -- the fact that it was a German pilot who made the observation that the first guy that put a machine gun on an airplane was a bastard, to be quite honest. I have no, I don't. They were -- they were doing what they conceived to be their duty, and I think we were doing likewise. I have no animosity toward them, none that I'm aware of.

Question: So when the war was done, it was done.

Answer: No, the war is never done. Never done. The war and its impact on the central nervous system and your memories are permanent. That's never done. What is done is the killing. And the destruction. What is not done is the healing. That will continue into perpetuity. Post-traumatic stress is a -- generally a permanent disorder. And it responds well to certain psychotropic drugs, but it will continue. I'm speaking as a psychologist now, I'm sorry.

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Question: Well we're -- I've got to cut you short now. I'd love to talk on and on but we've got to keep jumping along here.

Answer: Okay.

Question: Okay, the first thing, and starting with the actual statement, my name, I want to know your name, branch of military, and what your rank is.

Answer: Rank when in military.

Question: When you went in.

Answer: When I went?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: Well, I was an Aviation Cadet when I went in. (laughs)

Question: Okay. So when you got done -- let's go when you got done. My name is, the branch and --

Answer: Oh, when I finished my missions I was a captain and then after you got home they gave you one more step up, if you remember.

Question: So I need your name, branch of military, and rank.

Answer: Okay. Well, what do you want to say, a captain?

Question: Sounds good.

Answer: Yeah, okay. That was -- you know, same thing as you guys, you got so many missions, they gave you another stripe, and we got one more of the same thing you did. Okay.

OMV: That's called a compensatory promotion.

Answer: Yeah, attrition.