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World War II

In May 1942, I graduated from high school in Arp, Texas, and was too young to join the service. All the other boys were going in the military at the time, so men kept coming up and asking me, “Young man, why aren’t you in the service?” I was anxious to enlist and really wanted to be a pilot. Finally, I was able to join the Air Corps when I was 17. They called me right after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and ordered me to report to Shepherd Field for basic training. Charles William Musslewhite, my classmate in Arp, went with me on the bus.

I’ll never forget the GI’s standing around in boot camp pointing us out and saying, “New shoes! New shoes!” They knew we were the latest recruits. It was my first experience away from home. My parents had divorced when I was three years old and took my baby sister and me to my grandparents, who raised us. It was kind of hard to be away from home. I’d hear a lot of guys crying in the barracks at night because they were homesick.

After boot camp, I was sent to Las Vegas for aerial gunnery school. Las Vegas was just a sleepy, little old town then. When I took my first ride in a B-17 there, I thought it was the powerful thing I had ever seen. Once I had finished gunnery school, they assigned me to a crew in Salt Lake City. Then my crew was sent to Alexandria, Louisiana, where we flew combat training missions. Next we went to Carney, Nebraska, and were given the most beautiful B-17 you ever saw.

We flew to Bangor, Maine, and spent the night before flying to Gander, Newfoundland, and being delayed a few days because of weather conditions. From Gander, we flew to Wales, where they took our shiny new B-17 away from us. Standing there and watching it fly away, we were a bunch of sad kids. We had just been ferrying it across. Then we were sent to an airfield at Deophangreen near Attleborough, England, and joined the 452<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group.

One month after D-Day, we began flying combat missions on July 6, 1944. We flew whatever planes were available on the day of our mission. But our toughest mission (our second one) was flown aboard Lady Satan. We flew to Leisig, Germany. Over the target, we got into some tremendous antiaircraft fire. Though no one onboard was injured, our old plane was getting

hit everywhere and suffered a lot of damage. The automatic pilot caught on fire, and the engineer had to put it out with a fire extinguisher. There was a door between the compartment for the navigator and bombardier. When the engineer pulled the door open, the navigator hit him with a CO2 bottle in all the excitement. So the pilot had to fly back from the target with a walk-around bottle of oxygen.

We always flew above 30,000 feet during missions and had to wear oxygen masks. While in the air, we held regular drills. The bombardier would announce over the intercom, "Bombardier oxygen check." I would reply, "Tail gunner okay." Then everyone on the plane had to report as well. That way, we could be sure everyone was all right and had sufficient oxygen. If anyone's oxygen supply became disconnected, they could die in short order. The temperature at that altitude was 50 degrees below zero. So if we had to work on our equipment, there was the danger of frostbite.

As we flew over Leipsig that day, the antiaircraft gunfire was terrible. While flying back to the base over the English Channel, I looked up and saw that the control cables were severed in the waist and hanging down. I called the pilot and told him. He just said, "Roger." So I thought, *Well, if it doesn't bother him, it shouldn't bother me.* I found out later that he was planning on bringing the plane in on automatic pilot if necessary, but that had been shot out over the target. We made it back to the base with about 270 holes in Lady Satan. Fortunately, no one was injured, but it was terrifying.

Being so young, I always had wondered how I would stand up to combat. When it happened, I was so busy taking care of my assigned duties that there was no time to sit around and worry about it. I often looked down at the ground and thought about all those poor GI's who were fighting on the ground, dragging around in the mud, sleeping in trenches and eating cold C-Rations. Every night I slept in a clean bed and had warm food to eat. I really felt bad for those soldiers. Of course, a lot of our men were shot down over Germany and became prisoners of war.

We flew two food supply missions, one to Southern France and one to the corner of the Alps. While flying over the area, we dropped containers of supplies via parachutes. We could see people on the ground running out to get the supplies. I understand that after we dropped the supplies over a little community in Southern France, the Germans came in and killed everyone there. When we flew near Switzerland, the Swiss Air Force came out. Our fighters went out and told them to go home because we weren't going to bother them.

My regular flight crew had great discipline, but I occasionally flew with other crews as well. Then crews were reduced from ten men to nine men. I had started out as a waist gunner. Since there were two waist gunners on each crew, the plane was to take one of them off the crew. While flying a mission with a different crew than my own a couple of times, I found them to be extremely loud and undisciplined. Afterward, I told my pilot, "I was terrified on those missions. These guys had no discipline on the intercom whatever. They just screamed out." He saw to it that I didn't have to fly with anybody but our own crew after that. They moved me from the waist gunner position to the tail gunner position. Our tail gunner was taken off our flying crew because he was one of the few of us who were married then.

We all were well trained, and each crewmember had a particular duty to perform. Each of us went about our duties in a businesslike manner. We had to report any enemy actions that we might observe, so we tried to see as much as we could. Our reporting system was based on directions similar to the numbers on a clock. Twelve o'clock was straight ahead. Six o'clock was straight behind us. Before and after each mission, we went through a briefing session.

In the mornings, we would gather in a room for our preflight briefing session. When

everyone scheduled to fly the mission had arrived, they locked the door. At one end of the room, they had a map that was covered with sheets. After the doors were locked, the officer would remove the sheets, and our mission would be taped across the map. The old-timers would be groaning when they saw red tape going all the way across the map. Some of our missions were very long, especially the ones to Poltava, Russia. After flying a couple of missions in a row, we would be exhausted. The most I ever flew was four days in a row.

From my tail-gunner position, I watched our rear. I could identify a P-51 from as far away as I could see it because of the little scoop beneath it. Sometimes we would confuse the P-47s with the German ME-109s and the FW-190s. Our escorts were mostly P-51s. When we flew from Poltava, Russia, our escorts couldn't go with us. So we bombed Dasagor, Hungary, and landed in Italy. From Italy back to England, we flew unescorted over occupied France in a very sharp formation. It would have been hard to sneak up on us that day because we were extra alert.

I flew 21 of my 32 missions before my nineteenth birthday. The requirement originally was 25 missions during a tour of duty. They raised it to 30 and then 35 while I was there. When I landed after my 32<sup>nd</sup> mission on October 17, 1944, someone told me, "Gallager, they're looking for you over at headquarters. You're on orders to go home." I didn't argue with anybody or ask any questions. I just went to the barracks and packed. It took 12 days for the troop ship to make it back to the States. We were in a storm for the first three days and the last three days. I've never wanted to go on a cruise since then.

When I got back to the States, I still wanted to be a pilot. In order to join the cadets, I had to volunteer for another tour of flight missions after receiving my commission. I graduated from pre-flight school in San Antonio on VE Day. They marched us out on the field and said they were taking all enlisted pilot students out of training and sending us elsewhere. I was sent to B-29 engineering school in Amarillo. I was still there when they dropped the atomic bomb on Japan. Having earned enough points to get out of the service, I resigned from the cadets. I'll never forget the commandant's lecture. He said, "Mr. Gallagher, do you realize you'll never again be given the opportunity to become a flying officer in the United States Army Air Corps?"

"Yes, sir!" I said.

I'll never forget sailing by the Statue of Liberty when I returned to the States. I thought, *Old gal, you're gonna have to turn around to see me because I don't plan to go back again.*

I received my discharge in October 1945. My wife and I had graduated from high school together but didn't date until September 12, 1942. We married on December 12, 1945, and now have one daughter, two granddaughters and two great-granddaughters.

After the war, I worked for Baker Oil Tools for 38 years. I lived in Gainesville, Texas, for 21 years. Then I moved to Houston, Oklahoma City and back to Houston. I retired in 1987.

When I was in the Air Corps, I believed strongly in God. I was not exposed to the Lord Jesus Christ until later. I'm very thankful that Lester Collins baptized me when he was a preacher in El Campo, Texas. As a little boy, I used to pray to God to let me run faster. I always talked to God and spent a lot of time talking to Him in the tail of that B-17. I told Him that I just didn't think it would be fair for me to get killed so young. So many of the men I flew with were killed. It's wonderful when you can look back and see where the Lord's hand was right there with you all the time.

I still feel a strong sense of patriotism. We live in the greatest country in the world, no question about it. I think people always will be willing to stand up and fight for America. Since the events of September 11, 2001, our country has been more united. It's terrible that it took such a tragedy to bring us to that point.

We do not want to take “One nation under God” out of the pledge of allegiance. That is important and has to be there because we *are* one nation under God. It was God’s will and presence that got me through the war.