



James “Buck” Hughes
Sergeant, U.S. Army Air Corps
306th Bomb Group
World War II

Though my grandfather wanted to name me Buck when I was born, my parents named me James instead. He continued to call me Buck anyway, and it stuck in my old hometown of Tom Bean, Texas. I joined the U.S. Army Air Corps in September 1942. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, many men went into the service. The possibility of flying appealed to me, though I had only flown on puddle-jumpers before that. I was inducted in Dallas and sent to Camp Walters and then to Kerns, Utah. At that point, I had to decide whether to become a radio operator, mechanic or something else. Choosing mechanics, I attended an aircraft mechanics school in Lincoln, Nebraska. Four months later, I was sent to a specialized bomber plant in Michigan where Henry Ford was building B-24's and turning them off the line at the rate of one per hour.

Next I attended gunnery school in Harlingen, Texas, for about six weeks. Then I was sent to Langley Field, Virginia, for submarine patrol duty for six months. When the Navy took it over, I joined the cadets. After failing some psychomotive tests, I was assigned to a bomber crew in Florida preparing to leave for England. I was single and 22 years old. The Air Corps, like the Army, often trained a man on one piece of machinery but assigned him to work on another. In Florida, there were no B-24's, only B-17's. I was glad. Though they were both good airplanes, I thought the B-17's could take more punishment.

One of our crewmembers went home on a furlough before we left. He found out that Ponca City, Oklahoma, was subscribing for war bonds to buy a B-17. We got that B-17 by sending a telegram to the War Department in Washington. They stood us down in Savannah, Georgia, until our B-17 came off the assembly line in Marietta, Georgia. When we picked it up, we named her “Miss Ponca City” and gave it a shakedown before flying overseas. We sent another telegram to

the War Department asking for permission to take the plane to Ponca City to show the people what they bought, but they turned us down because we were needed in Europe.

We flew to Gander and on to Knutts Corner, Ireland. From there our crew went to Stone, England, where we took a refresher course in aerial gunnery before being assigned to the 306th Bomb Group in August 1944. Though we started out with a 10-man crew, they took one man away in England. The new B-17's had staggered waist guns, and only one waist gunner was needed to operate them. Flying in formations called combat boxes, each aircraft had only one side from which to fire since planes surrounded its other sides. General Lemay figured out that formation, and it was known as the best "cone of fire" — the best concentration of firepower against German fighter planes.

Our crew consisted of the pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator, radio operator, tail gunner, waist gunner, belly gunner and two turret gunners. Miss Ponca City carried a lot of firepower with 6,000 pounds of bombs, thirteen .50-caliber guns used by the gunners and one .30-caliber gun for the radio operator.

At two or three o'clock in the morning, we would get up, eat breakfast and attend a briefing about our destination that day. The bombardiers, pilots and navigators attended another briefing while the rest of the crew prepared the plane, loaded the ammunition and hooked the guns up so they would be ready to fire. At takeoff time, all the planes would line up on the runway wing-to-wing or staggered-wing. After the first plane started rolling, the second plane would follow 30 seconds later. We usually flew in groups of 36 planes, with a B-17 taking off every 30 seconds. With the fog in England, sometimes we didn't know if the plane in front of us had taken off or not.

The average number of missions for bomber crews in England at that time was five. We made the average since we were shot down on our fifth mission. In Germany, my crew bombed the oil refineries at Ludwigshave twice and the submarine pens in Keil once. Our third mission was flown as part of a 1,000-plane raid on an oil refinery and German military base at Maydeburg. That was something to see. The purpose of using so many aircraft at once was to saturate and knock out a target.

On September 12, 1944, we were shot down while flying to a town southeast of Berlin to bomb a ball-bearing factory. We were the eighth plane in our group to go down that day. Germany had concentrated all their fighter planes around Berlin because Hitler didn't want his city destroyed. Our main objective had been to draw the fire of those fighters so our fighter planes could get to them. Later I heard that we shot down 375 German planes and practically annihilated the Luftwaffe during that two-day mission.

We were flying at 27,000 feet, and the Germans were throwing everything they had at us. When the fighters came in, we were hit pretty hard by flak and from a nose attack by a Messerschmidt 109 (ME-109). Our plane caught on fire. I couldn't get the ball turret man out. Of our crew of nine, three of us got out alive. The other three men never made it out of the plane. We had lost our electrical system, and the pilot wasn't able to communicate orders to us. Normally he would hit the bailout bell as a signal, but he couldn't do that. The voice of the Lord told me to get out of that plane, so I bailed out along with the radio operator and copilot. The radio operator hit a highline wire and was killed near the ground. The ball turret operator was blown out of the airplane but survived. I didn't realize he was alive until I met him in France on my way home much later.

After jumping, I remembered to delay opening my chute until I could recognize objects on the ground. Otherwise, a German fighter pilot might have been able to shoot me or pass by and

throw his airstream into me, thus collapsing my chute. We had been briefed that there would be a cloud formation in the target area around Berlin at 4,000 feet. When I hit that thin layer of clouds, I pulled my ripcord. The chute opened, and I landed in a plowed field. My left foot ended up on top of a furrow, but my right foot was broken when it went into the furrow.

A German man, his daughter and son, and two French forced laborers were standing there waiting for me. I couldn't run, of course, when they came toward me. The German asked if I was English or American, and I told him I was an American. Then he asked, "Do you have a pistol?" At one time, crewmembers carried .45-caliber pistols. With only nine shots, they weren't very effective; so we were no longer carrying them. When I told the man no, he said, "Well, for you the war is over." He immediately took me to his house, where a German lady about 80 years old gave me a cold cup of coffee and was sympathetic about my injury. Then they called the German police, who came to pick me up.

The police took me to the burgermeister (mayor), who had me stand at attention while he walked around me about 15 times hollering and screaming. I had a bath in his saliva because he was so mad. My copilot was there along with airmen from other crews, but we had been taught not to show any recognition of one another to avoid providing useful information to the enemy. Finally, some German soldiers came and took us to a German Army Camp overnight. At no time did anyone provide any type of medical care or bandages for my broken foot.

We spent the next four days on a train to Frankfurt with Germans walking by and slashing out at us as though they were angry. In Frankfurt, the interrogation process began. We had been taught to only provide our name, rank and serial number. When they gave me a sheet of paper filled with questions, I wrote down just those three things and put an X on the rest. That made them mad, but they really didn't need it. They said, "Well, we don't need anything on you. You're Sgt. James Hughes from the 306th Bomb Group, and your commanding officer is General Roberts." They had an intelligence system just like we did.

Basically, the Germans treated captured enlisted men and officers the same. A P-52 pilot was there, though they thought he had been on a B-17. If they had realized he was a fighter pilot, they would have given him a littler rougher time. But they really didn't abuse us in any way.

We were in Frankfurt about five or six days before they gave us some Red Cross material and a Salvation Army kit with toiletries like toothpaste, shaving items, etc. They also issued everyone a set of clothes that would have to last for the duration of our stay at the POW camp. Then they loaded us onto another train. We rode for four days and four nights to Stalag Luft 4, a prisoner of war camp at Grostychow in the old East Prussia area. The town's name has changed since then. Four compounds with ten barracks each held about 9,000 POW's at the time. Two high barbed-wire fences with rolled barbed wire between them surrounded the camp, along with guard towers all around manned by German soldiers with machineguns. A warning wire also circled the camp about 10 feet inside the fences. If a prisoner crossed that wire, it was open season and he could be shot.

Life in the prison camp wasn't too awfully bad. The worst thing was the thought of not being free and not seeing the American flag. Twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, we were fed Irish potatoes in a variety of dishes prepared by our own people at a mess hall within our compound. Sometimes Red Cross parcels would arrive with corned beef in cans, preserves, graham crackers and such. Our cooks would mix the corned beef with the potatoes when they could. We still had to serve KP duty and peel potatoes.

We always were looking for any kind of food we could get, especially meat. Though I wasn't in on one particular party, I witnessed it. A cat used to come across the camp at a certain

time of day, and he always walked along the same path. For about a month, some guys worked on a plan to catch that cat. On C-Day (Cat Day), they placed several men strategically along the cat's path so he wouldn't be able to escape. They finally caught the cat and skinned him before his heart quit beating. That night they cooked and ate him. A fellow named Hans delivered bread in a horse-drawn wagon every day. He showed up once with a different horse. When Hutsinger, one of our guys in the mess hall, asked him what had happened to his horse, Hans said, "I don't know. He gone. You eat him today." So they fed us horsemeat.

At one time, Hitler ordered that all Bibles were to be burned. But one of the men at my camp had managed to hold on to a copy of the New Testament that had been in his pocket when he was shot down. The guards wouldn't let us stockpile food from our Red Cross parcels because they thought we might try to escape if we had enough food. Just before Christmas 1944, we began stockpiling graham crackers, chocolate bars and other things so we could make a Christmas cake. When a search party would come by, we would cover it up and put that copy of the New Testament on top of it. The German guards wouldn't touch it. They were afraid of Bibles because Hitler was so firmly against them. I'm surprised they allowed us to keep it.

The Germans took our billfolds and anything in them that read "U.S. Government" — dollar bills, Social Security cards, etc. When I had boarded the train in Denison, Texas, to go overseas, my dad had given me an 1859 Indianhead penny. I stuck it way down in the corner of my billfold so I wouldn't lose it. The Germans never found it. So I never was broke at prison camp because I always had one penny. Today, I still carry that penny in my pocket.

We had to answer two roll calls a day. They would line us up for a headcount to see if anyone had escaped, and we had fun with that. Some of those Germans were about a quart low. On good days, we'd foul up the count by crawling down the back of the line and standing up at the other end. On bad days, we would give them a good count. But we liked doing just about anything to irritate them a little bit.

Books were brought into the camp by the Red Cross and other sources, as well as band instruments. Some of the prisoners formed an orchestra and put on concerts. Whenever a new group of prisoners would come in, the band members would find out about the latest songs by having the guys hum or sing them. Within a week, they'd be playing those songs around the camp. The Salvation Army and International Red Cross also did a good job of getting baseballs, bats, mitts, footballs and other things to us at the camp. They shipped the items through Sweden. All those things helped boost our morale. Two guys in my barracks were studying to become preachers, and they held church services. That's what kept me going.

Believe it or not, we had a radio at our compound that was put together by the British POW's. I believe those guys could have put a radio together out of a safety pin. That radio picked up special broadcasts of the latest news by the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) beamed to the American and British POW's every night at midnight. One man would report one piece of news to a group of prisoners while others reported the other news items all over the camp. If a German guard came by to see what the man was doing, he would eat the paper containing his notes so they wouldn't discover the fact that we had a radio. They probably knew it because they always were trying to find it.

We were allowed to write two postcards and one letter per month. In October, I wrote a letter to my mother in Sherman, Texas. She didn't receive it until the following February. I never received any mail, but some of the guys who had been there longer did. One man wrote to his mother asking her to send him a pair of shoes since his only pair was about worn out. Without thinking about the length of time caused by censorship in both directions, his mother wrote back

to ask what color he wanted. Though I couldn't believe it, another boy received the following letter from his girlfriend:

*Dear George,
I just married your father.
Love, Mother*

Escapes were not attempted at my camp, though they were at others. We were so isolated in East Prussia that there was nowhere for us to go other than the Baltic Sea or Sweden. Escape was almost out of the question. The camp commander came out everyday during roll call. If the guards suspected anything, they would walk through the barracks. But they didn't bother us.

The men in my bomber crew had become as close as brothers, even the officers. Though we showed respect for our officers, we still were a close-knit group. At the prison camp, I grew even closer to my fellow prisoners. There were 25 men in my room, and we all became good friends. In fact, I still call one of them quite often, though he wasn't one of my crewmembers. He lives in Joplin, Missouri.

I arrived at the camp during the latter part of September or early October 1944. On February 6, 1945, they put us on the road on a forced march. We marched more than 805 kilometers (500 miles) across Germany and were forced to sleep on the ground in fields or in barns on German farms. That was Germany's worst winter in 50 years. We had to scrounge food where we could get it — like robbing piles of Irish potatoes, stealing chickens, and eating wild onions. Nine thousand men started out on that march, but the Germans couldn't handle all of us at one time. So they broke us up into smaller groups of 200 to 600 men and sent them off in all different directions. My group consisted of about 200 men. The Russians were driving toward Berlin by then, and the Germans wanted to hang onto us for better surrender terms.

Hitler had ordered that we be shot. Herman Goering refused to do it, so they fell out at that point. Then Hitler demanded that Goering take our shoes and trousers away and put us on a forced march. But Goering agreed only to the forced march and did not take anything away from us. He said the Air Corps and Luftwaffe were two high-classed outfits, and they were not to be treated that way.

A flight surgeon named Dr. Kaplan had been shot down and was assigned to our compound as our doctor. Sometimes the flight surgeons flew with crews to observe their reactions. During the forced march, some guys really needed help. He took them under his surveillance and guided them through. If they were too sick or too injured to go on, he had the Germans drop them off at a hospital in the area. Some of those men were never heard from again. More than 5,000 men were reported missing in action in Germany and never were found. Dr. Kaplan tried to swap things with the Germans to get fresh eggs and things for the injured men. He even was able to get the Germans to give him a horse and wagon so he could haul the men who couldn't walk. One day, he operated on a boy with appendicitis using a razor blade and sewing him up with ordinary thread. The boy probably would have died otherwise.

Accompanied by Luftwaffe guards with dogs, we marched through the countryside on back roads and even on the Autobahn. My group stuck together because the German civilians probably would have killed American escapees. At least we knew the guards would protect us. Sometimes we were just walking in circles, doubling back and forth. The night before our liberation, our German camp commander (a tech sergeant who had aides, adjutants, etc. back at the camp) was kidnapped by his men and taken across to the American lines. Then they came back across and told us we would be liberated the next day.

We knew we were close to the American lines. Two German tank boys came by one day

while I was standing in front of my temporary compound, and they asked how far it was to the American lines. When I said I had no idea, they told me they intended to go there and surrender. Then they gave me a cigarette and went on their way. The next day, we marched across the Elbe River and slept in a schoolhouse that night. Those same two German boys were there moving desks out, and I walked over and gave them a cigarette.

The day of our liberation was a great day. Marching down the road, everybody was happy and crying. The German commander who had replaced the kidnapped commander stopped and said, "If there is any German soldier who wants to fight for the Fatherland, now's the time to turn around and go back." Two men turned around and left. The rest went with us because they were ready to give up.

We walked toward the Elbe River at the little town of Bitterfeld, Germany. The bridge had been bombed out, so we crossed on a pontoon bridge. The bedroll I had slept in for 81 days without bathing or shaving was full of body lice. As we walked across that bridge, I tossed it into the river and watched it float away. Then I looked up and saw a line of ambulances with doctors and nurses standing beside them. As we reached them, they pulled out the American soldiers who looked the worst and put them in the ambulances for transport to a hospital. Fortunately, I was able to keep walking.

The American government had 9,000 men dropped on them at one time from our camp alone. They were trying to do the best they could by providing us with K-rations and bedding us down wherever possible in Bitterfeld. They wouldn't let us overload on food since we hadn't eaten anything in so long.

Soon we were moved to Holly, Germany. From there, we went to Herman Goering's personal airfield. During our stay at the plush airfield, we were DDT'd to kill the bugs and issued new clothes. While there, we heard President Truman declare the end of the war with Germany on May 8, 1945. Around the 10th of May, we were flown to Rheims, France, where we boarded trains to Camp Lucky Strike. The Americans had set up several camps for the American POW's and named them after cigarettes, like Chesterfield, Lucky Strike and Phillip Morris. At Camp Lucky Strike, I met some of the intelligence officers from my group. They had flown over from England to debrief us and learn everything they could about our experiences.

Never a heavysset guy, I weighed about 115 by the end of the forced march. But I saw men who originally weighed 190 and ended up at 115. I think the skinny fellows fared a little better. It was a great experience, and actually the German people were good people. They were driven into that situation through their fear of Hitler.

On June 7, 1945, I left Camp Lucky Strike and boarded a ship at Leharve, France, to return to the United States. At Fort Sam Houston, Texas, I was given a 60-day leave and sent home. Then I received an 18-day extension because they didn't have room for us at the redistribution base in Santa Monica, California. I stayed at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Santa Monica until I was transferred to Perrin Air Force Base, just six miles from my home. Working with the Personal Equipment Group at Perrin, I lectured men about parachute jumps until I earned enough points to be discharged six weeks later at Shepherd Field.

My foot eventually heeled without medical attention. I had been wearing fur-lined boots when I bailed out, but the Germans confiscated those and issued me a pair of British high-top shoes. So I laced my shoe as tightly as possible and stayed off that foot as much as I could. Fortunately, I was all right by the time we began the forced march.

Going into the war, the American soldiers knew it was a war that had to be fought and that we would win an unconditional surrender. There were so many American soldiers in England,

along with the 8th and 9th Air Force, that the island raised up about a foot out of the water when they left. We were determined to protect our country and our flag.

I wouldn't take a million dollars for my experiences during the war, but I also wouldn't go through it again for a million dollars. It made me love the flag more and recognize it as the symbol of our country. I know my experiences helped me to love God more, too, and to become a better Christian. There's no doubt in my mind that my faith pulled me through. At the prison camp, I didn't know from one day to the next what would happen to me. The day I bailed out, I know I heard a voice telling me to bail out. I believe it was either an angel or God. I guess the good Lord protected me because he had something for me to do. Raised in a Christian family, I always had gone to Sunday school and church.

I never returned to Europe after the war. I left those footsteps over there and don't want them back. I'll stay right here. The Air Corps was a little different from the Army. Army men probably saw a little more of Europe than the Air Corps guys, who mainly just flew over and returned to the base. I wish the Army troops could have had some of our same privileges. For example, we were able to take a bath and shave every night after completing our missions. But it took all of us to win the war.

From what I understand, young people in America today do not study history much. Every child in school needs to know about the wars the United States had to fight to keep this country free. It disturbs me when I hear about people who don't want children to recite the allegiance to the American flag because the word "God" is in that pledge. It is disheartening to think of all the lives sacrificed during World War II to protect this great country and then see that sort of thing happen. Seems to me that the courts and others are trying to eliminate God from everything, but God needs to be there.