Virginians at War
SSGT Bill Hulcher
Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

Staff Sergeant Lawrence W. "Bill" Hulcher
U.S. Army Air Corps
World War II B-17 Waist Gunner and Togglier
Shot down over Czechoslovakia
Prisoner of War

GOING TO WAR

HULCHER: Oh, my buddy and I read something in the papers, it says, "Come into the Air Force and work with the tools you work with." I'd never worked with a tool in my life. But we went down there, took the test, and if you knew which end of the gun the bullet came out of, you could pass the test, so we both passed that. I took my physical and passed it. He took his physical and failed it, and I could have killed him. So I went in and he stayed at home.

AT THE FRONT

HULCHER: I was on my ninth one when we were hit by an aircraft fire. We were at 23,000 feet. It was supposed to be a cloudy day, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky. And it was the longest raid the 15th Air Force ever ran: 1,600 miles to Berlin, we were going. But them jet fighters hit them when they got to Berlin. So I think of all the planes that went on the mission that day – and as far as you could see, there was nothing but airplanes – I think three or four got back to Yugoslavia.

I got hit before we got to Berlin. We got hit over Friedberg, Germany by an antiaircraft flyer. Knocked us down like flies. We were falling like nothing. Well, it caught on fire and smoke started pouring back through the plane. So the tail gunner hollered, "The bailout buzzer is ringing. Should we bail out?" By that time, all of them had gone, up in the front part of the plane. So I said, "Yes. Go ahead." But

he ended up being killed, I don't know how. He was killed, the ball turret gunner was killed, the radio operator was killed, and the other waist gunners were killed. All of those around me were all killed. Those up at the front left the plane. The engineer said he went down to see about the fire, saw that it was burning the oxygen bottles. Knowing that the thing was going to explode, he bailed out. And the others saw him go, so they left. None of us knew anything about it in the back part of the plane at that time. Just smoke was pouring in there.

At first, I tried to get the ball turret gunner up. I had called him on the intercom, and there was no answer from him. So I disengaged the clutches and cranked him up, and there wasn't much left of him. He had more or less gotten a direct hit when it hit the oxygen bottles, just forward of that area.

And we didn't even have a 'chute on, you know. You wear your harness all the time. But my 'chute was laying down over on the side of the plane. And all of a sudden, it fell off to the side. It threw me over on my 'chute. So I quickly hooked one side of it – two hooks – I quickly hooked one side of it. And so, then it started spinning down. Centripetal force was holding me in there. I couldn't budge. And then, I came to, floating down.

We had 3,000 gallons of gasoline and six 1,000 pound bombs aboard. And that exploded. Fortunately it exploded rather than imploded, because that blew it all away from me. And when I came to, I guesstimated I was maybe about 10,000 feet when we were at 23,000 feet when we were hit. But God, I wasn't suffering from any cold. Well up there at 23,000 feet you freeze real quick-like, you know? You stop breathing from lack of oxygen. But at 10,000 feet, you can stand it.

Most of my clothes were in shreds. I didn't have many clothes on. My mask was gone and my flak suit was gone, and I was hanging there by this one hook on my harness. So I quickly hooked the other side. And the 'chute, I looked up and the 'chute was full of holes. But I had no feeling of movement, unless I passed through a cloud. It's a very strange feeling. It's so quiet up there. You're used to the roar of those four engines, then all of a sudden, nothing. Not a sound in this world. And the only feeling of movement is when you pass through a cloud.

But then, eventually I got close enough to the ground for them to see me, and then they started shooting at me, and bullets were winding all around me. So, I'd always been told that you could collapse your 'chute if you pull down on one side – give it a hard yank. And so, I did. And sure as hell, it collapsed. And then I knew I was

moving. But just before I got to the ground, I let go and it plopped back up. And then I hit the ground, and they started running towards me, and I was trying to collapse my 'chute at that time, because the wind was behind me and blowing me across this field. I finally got it collapsed and disconnected from me, and then they were motioning me to come towards them. Of course, I didn't speak their language. They didn't speak mine either. So it was a lot of hand talk. And then all of a sudden I remembered my escape shoes. I had them attached to my harness. A lot of guys didn't bother with them. But they were black shoes, looked like European shoes, and you attach them to your harness. And I happened to remember those, and I turned around and went back to my harness again to get my shoes.

Well, they shot some more, but fortunately they didn't hit me, and everybody said, "It's a wonder they didn't shoot you, you know, for trying to escape." But I guess they tried, but they missed me. And anyway, I got my shoes and fortunately that more or less saved me, because those flying shoes that you wear are just fur-lined, and they'll last maybe a mile or so. And we were walking in snow up to our knees, 20 miles a day eventually, and they put us up in barns at night. So a lot of people had frozen feet. I still have problems with mine.

As an enlisted man, I didn't even know where we were going. And so you give your name, rank, and serial number, you know, like you're supposed to do, and that's all you could give anyway. You don't know anything else. They don't appreciate it, you know. They're beating on you. I had my hands wired behind my back, and they took me to a railroad station and I met three other guys that were on my plane. I hardly recognized them. They had been beaten so bad that I hardly recognized them. And I saw one of the prettiest girls I think I ever saw in my life – a pretty, blonde German girl – and I winked at her, because she smiled at me. And the guard saw me wink at her and he about… I still suffer from where that man beat me.

But they'd put us up in barns at night. We got one thin bowl of potato soup, once a day. And we would eat whatever we could find. I got to like raw potatoes. We even got a chicken one time. We ate that raw. But we lived more or less off of dandelions, the leaves, and anything we could find at the barn.

Eventually, I arrived at a little town called Gartz, G-A-R-T-Z, on the [Oder] River. And that was a medical center. A patrol of eight men from Patton's 3rd Army, the Blackhawks, 86th Division, came in and liberated us. All of us. There, they took over, and then we went through the town, collecting all the guns. We had P-38's and Luger's packed up, higher than the ceiling of this room, in the street. You could

have all you wanted. I never got one, but some of them did. Later on, at Camp Lucky Strike, you'd hear one go off, and some of them had been booby-trapped. And I got to thinking, you went through all of this and then killed yourself over a gun, for a souvenir.

But, you don't make too many friends in the military, because somebody's always dying. You go through, like the first crew I was on – I told you I was in the 8th Air Force – and I was transferred off of my crew that I'd gone through all the training with in the States. I'd flown overseas with them. And then, they were all killed, after I was transferred off of the plane. And I got on this plane, and six of us out of the ten survived. But you know, they don't make new friends, because it's too hard on you.

COMING HOME

HULCHER: I was on a streetcar after I got home, the only time I wore my uniform. One time. And I happen to remember, this woman sat down beside me, and she looked at my ribbons and she saw that European Theater ribbon, with that star on it. And she says, "I don't know why you're at home. My son is not home yet, and he has one of those ribbons that has two stars on it." I said, "Lady," I said, "I don't have any idea how many ports your son has with regards to getting out of the service." I said, "But that's a Silver Star, and it stands for five." And she never said anything else again.

But now we have memorials for Vietnam. We now have memorials for Korea. And after over 50 years, we're still planning on having a World War II Memorial. I said with… I'm age 77, and I'm the average age of a World War II veteran. And with veterans dying at the rate of 1,000 a day, it is unlikely that any of us who were in World War II will ever see a World War II Memorial. I said, "I know I won't, because I've just been told last August that I had six months to live, or less."

Bill Hulcher died within six months of this interview on March 3, 2000.
Thanks Bill, for all you've done.

HULCHER: Thank you, sir. Appreciate it.

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