

Virginians at War

WWII: POWs - Germany

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.

WORLD WAR II: 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the Asiatic-Pacific theater, and to the far west, the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European theater. The first World War II American POW in Germany was captured on April 14th, 1942. He was one of almost 94,000 Army and Air Force personnel that were housed in more than 50 permanent camps in the European and Mediterranean theaters.

P.O.W. 1941-1945 GERMANY

BROOKS: October the 13th, which happened to be Friday, we were bombing marshalling yards in Vienna. And the plane took a direct hit in one of the engines, and flipped over on its back and was going down in a spin. And the bombardier and myself – I was the navigator – were up in the nose. And every time we'd get up to the escape hatch, which was now overhead instead of down below, the centripetal force would throw us back to the front of the plane.

JAMES: The fighter planes set fire to our right wing. We had flames coming back over the tail. So, when this occurred, there was only one thing you could do. That's get the heck out of there, because aircraft burn quite hot, quite fast, and I don't feel like getting roasted.

JEFFERSON: So the day we were shot down, we were in the lead airplane, and the group lost six aircraft that day, and three men aboard our aircraft were killed. We

bailed out. We were attacking **Wiederhofen** Oil Storage and Refinery area, on the Danube River along the northeastern edge of Vienna.

ASHLEY: I think it was the number four engine that was shot out on the target. And then the other engines were damaged so badly that they progressively stopped operating. But we were able to get over the Alps, coming back, fortunately. We were losing altitude and we were on one engine, which was time, of course, to leave. The pilot gave us the word and we bailed out. All of us were able to abandon ship safely, without any serious injuries.

SCOTT: On the 25th of May, I had another mission. And that was my last mission. There were 96 planes in the sky, and four fighters. Out of 100 planes in the sky, we were the only one to get hit. I knocked the escape hatch off, up at the tail. I sat on the tail of the plane and looked down, looked out, looked down, looked out, and finally I turned loose. And I hit on this hillside. My feet gave way underneath of me, and I sat back down on my rear end. And I broke my back. So, I tried to run, but I couldn't do much. I was on all fours. So finally the Germans got me.

BROOKS: Finally, we held on, and beat the escape door open with our fists. And I was the first one out, and I don't have no idea how long I dropped, but I was tumbling, and I didn't want to open my 'chute while I was tumbling. So I spread-eagled, started going down feet-first, and I had on a chest 'chute and pulled the release cord. Threw it to the side. And in a few minutes, I looked down and the parachute was still there. So I pulled it open with my hands.

JEFFERSON: I was about to go out the bomb – the nose wheel door, and a navigator who had been assigned to fly in the nose turret, he yelled at me that he was hung up in his turret, and couldn't get out. I had looked back to the tunnel, to the bomb bay and globules of gasoline that looked as big as half gallon buckets were just cascading down through that bomb bay. I'll never know why the aircraft didn't explode and kill us all, but it didn't. I came back to the turret and pulled him out, and we bailed out.

JAMES: Something went through my parachute pack. And when I got ready to use it, I discovered a hole I could put my fist through. But, I figured it was better to drop to the earth a little fast – I might survive it – than it was to sit there and get roasted, which I knew I wouldn't survive. So I said, "Thank you, Lord" and rolled out of the 17, parachute and all. It was a wild ride, but that's alright. It got me there. And I hit the ground so blasted hard that it knocked me out. Broke my leg in five places. I woke

up to somebody rubbing my face with slimy sandpaper. It was one of these damn black and white cows. It was licking the cordite off my face.

ASHLEY: Some prisoners, they were captured early in the war. They had no idea how long they were gonna be a prisoner. But for me, of course, I became a prisoner, was shot down on Christmas day and actually didn't become a real prisoner until January the 22nd. That night, we were awakened by breaking glass and Germans telling us that we were prisoners of the Reich. We found out that the Germans, at that time, paid 15,000 dollars to the **Czechs** for us.

CUBBINS: But you know, in that whole ordeal, the only thing that impressed me was how lonesome it was, sitting on the ground and hearing groups flying over, heading back home, knowing they'd be home in about three hours, you know? I looked up and there was the 376th with all those holes in the formation where they'd really taken a beating. And boy, I wish I was up there. And that's something that every prisoner goes through. Just a great, leaden loneliness, even... completely alone in a group of 1,000 men, easily.

ASHLEY: Well, interrogation was just in a room, interrogating. Knows his English... has more than likely lived in the United States at some point. And knows the cities and towns in the United States. And they tried to extract information other than name, rank, and serial number.

SCOTT: You didn't know when you was coming out of there. You didn't know what the Germans was gonna do to you. They took us one time to take a shower, let's see... that was in Bonn, Germany. I only got two showers the whole time I was in Germany, for a year. We were worried that they were gonna turn the hot water on to us. You were scared every time that they done something for you. You was afraid that they was gonna do something to hurt you.

JEFFERSON: You know when you've been shot down, and something like this just completely unscheduled happens to you, every single thing that happens, every five minutes is new to you. You have to learn to adjust to the circumstances. It didn't take very long until I was very hungry, for the first time in my life. And I had no idea where the next meal might come from, or when it would come.

JAMES: Under the Geneva Convention, we were supposed to get the same rations that the German civilians got, which we did. When the civilians got through picking

over the issue of the day, whatever garbage was left over, they brought up to camp and said, "Okay, here's your share."

JEBENS: Daily ration was a cup of real thin soup, no meat in it, maybe some potatoes and carrots, and then about a two-inch slice of black bread, and one cup of Ersatz coffee, made out of roasted barley.

JEFFERSON: We got about, well, two or three slices, maybe a quarter of an inch thick, of black, dark German bread, which was – in good parts – sawdust.

CUBBINS: I developed a joke that I would play on new prisoners coming in, say, "Well, you're gonna love the food here, 'til you see it." Said, "You're gonna take one look at it, with bug particles and sheep's eyeballs and things like that." And I said, "You're not gonna eat it. But the end of the week, you're gonna be so hungry that you'll take that stuff out and you'll eat it anyway. And at the end of two weeks, you're gonna eat it, bugs and all. And after you've been here three weeks, anything that tries to get away you're gonna put back in there and think about how good this is, and how lucky you are."

ASHLEY: Lost a tremendous amount of weight. Of course, I don't know what weight I was at, at that time, but I was in the 160's and ended up being about 120.

BROOKS: They came in 11:30 one night and said to be prepared to march in 30 minutes. And they marched us out of there, and we walked for days and nights. I think it was about 30 hours before we had a decent break.

JEBENS: We walked from the St. Vith area to Koblenz, which is well over 100 miles. We were put on freight trains one day. We went to a short distance. There were the old 48... 40 and eight boxcars, were famous from World War I, either 40 men or eight horses. Well, they apparently had had eight horses in there before they put, in this case, 64 men into a boxcar, and they put us into a siding. And we stood there, and that was the day that the skies over the Bulge area opened, and the Air Force came through. And fighter planes spotted this train sitting on a siding with smoke coming out of the rooms where the guards were cooking their meals. So we were strafed by American planes, and there were dead or wounded in every... in every boxcar. The man next to me... a .50 caliber machine gun bullet went through his steel helmet, and just broke the surface of his forehead, and then went through the floor between his legs. A very good friend of mine was hit, and as we... he just said,

"I'm shot in two." And he died. We were in this boxcar. It was locked up. We couldn't get out. We could hear the planes coming back.

JEFFERSON: The German front got up close to Stalag Luft 3, at Sagan. And on the 29th of January, 1945, they dumped us – there were over 10,000 men in that one camp – they dumped us right out in the middle of a blizzard, and force-marched us; to where, we didn't know, but we were headed west.

SCOTT: The night that we knew we were liberated, they turned the... they had speakers in the barracks, and they turned the radio on to the speakers. And the Lucky Strike Hit Parade was on. And the number one song on Hit Parade was "Don't Fence Me In." And the bunch that I was with in that barracks just stood there, crying.

ASHLEY: We hadn't been at Luftburg too long. I don't think it was more than a couple of weeks. And of course, we could hear the conflicts around, knowing that it was coming close by. And then, it came closer by, and bullets started flying. Most all of us, you know, got under the barracks, or whatever enclosure we could get where we felt more safe. And then, what seemed like all of a sudden, after an hour or two of this, the bullets stopped and the guards disappeared, the gates opened, and we were released.

JAMES: We were liberated by the 4th Ukraine Army. The Russians had come up to the, let me think, Dnieper River and had stopped, and had shelled across the river. One of the greatest artillery barrages I ever saw in my life. 48 of us! In the daytime, it sounded like a rumble of thunder, it never stopped. And at night, the whole horizon glowed from the flash of cannon. Then, they got their boats out and came across. I had a Russian, told me, best crossing he ever made. Nobody fired a shot at him. Now, when the bonfire went out and the rumble stopped, the guards had all disappeared. There was nobody in the guard towers, there were no Germans to be found, but we were still locked in the buildings. Well you can imagine, the doors weren't right fast. It didn't take long to break our way out, and we broke our way out in a hurry and cautiously took over the camp.

BROOKS: We could hear gunfire fairly close, and on April 29th this tank came up to the gate and put it in high gear, and the gate went "plop." That big tank rolled through, and all these prisoners were on it before you could say "skat."

JEFFERSON: So, General Patton's 14th Armored Division came booming through there on the 29th of April, 1945. I hate to tell this story, but it's difficult. I happened to be looking at the town of Mooseburg, and I saw the swastika come down, and the stars and stripes go up.

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