

Leroy Roberts

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Question: We were talking -- we'll go quickly. The names of your planes?

Answer: The names of the planes? Yeah, as I said, I flew Hammerin' Hank that belonged to another guy, my flight leader, Nelson. And of course my skipper's airplane was called Skipper's Darlin'. Our commander, group commander, General Davis, his -- he always named his plane By Request. No matter what the model was or whatever, his plane was named By Request. There's a lot of little anecdotes that came out of the experiences I had and one had to do with -- I was giving an explanation to a class one day about the external tanks we used that gave us the long range we needed ferrying bombers in and out on long missions. We had external tanks and they -- I forget the capacity of those tanks, but the crew chiefs, before they'd fill them with gasoline they'd put cans of beer inside these cans -- in these tanks. And then they'd fill them up with gasoline. And you know how cold gasoline is. And you carry them up to 25, 30,000 feet, they'd get real cold, and we would always bring them back some very cold beer. And another experience I had was -- was talking about the ammo that we carried and -- and things that we destroyed with the 50 caliber ammunition. Now the P-51 had six 50-caliber machine guns firing forward, of course, and the P-47 had eight 50-caliber machine guns. And with the fire power from the P-47, one of the flyers from my group sunk a German destroyer in the Adriatic Sea

Answer: And that was a -- that was a first, too, for Army Air Corps to have a German destroyer being sunk by gunfire from, you know, 50 caliber machine gun. And another thing I've explained in some of these presentations I make is -- I show a picture showing the armorers loading those guns in a P-51, and they on the wing loading these wing guns and they load these belts of ammunition. And I would explain to them I never knew the number of rounds we carried, number of total rounds, but we did what always say that there were nine yards of ammunition in those belts, and we also say that that is where, I'm told that we got the term the whole nine yards. And they always like to hear that terminology.

Question: When you took off you wanted to know - the whole --

Answer: That's right -- how much you have to get you there and back.

Question: So a 50 millimeter shell, that's not very big?

Answer: Yes, it is, that's quite a piece of ammunition there.

Question: But what did you say he sunk with it?

Answer: Huh?

Question: You said he sunk one of the ships --

Answer: Destroyer.

Question: Destroyer.

Answer: With 50 caliber of ammunition, yeah.

Question: That's --

Answer: Yeah, it's pretty good. That's pretty long slug, you know and it's got a lot of -- lot of power behind it. There's a lot of gun power in that little shell. And some of the ammunition was armor-piercing, so it would go through -- sections and pieces of steel now

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and then, iron. And it would -- it would take its toll. And of course there's a cone of fire in front of a -- a fighter plane about, you know, generally 300 yards out, and what the bullets would cross, they would meet and if you get caught in that cone, you'd had it. That's pretty -- that's pretty lethal area out there.

Question: Did you fly any night missions?

Answer: Oh, yes, we flew night missions.

Question: So you'd see the -- the tracers?

Answer: Oh, you could see the tracers coming; you could see the gunfire coming.

Question: So what's that like? Do you hear them? I mean --

Answer: No, you -- you wouldn't hear it unless, you know, pretty close in. But seeing it - - seeing all those -- well, if you'll accept the term great balls of fire, coming after you -- it -- it gets a little -- little, you know, shake you up a little bit.

Question: It must be a great feeling though when you come back from a mission

Answer: Oh, yes, cause you always get mission whiskey after you get back.

Question: What's that?

Answer: Mission whiskey -- your flight -- your flight surgeon would always give you two or three ounces of mission whiskey, you see, so that's something to come back to.

Question: Motivation for a good mission.

Answer: (laughs)

Question: Is there anything you did in your airplane that maybe one of your CO's might have been upset you were out having some fun or anything that --

Answer: Oh, yeah, there's things like that happened all the time, you know. You'd make your landing pattern too tight. Or you'd do out -- doing a little buzzing and things like that -- flying under bridges and things like that. And so, they -- they didn't care for that, and the Air Force didn't care for it either, so, but we did it anyway, that's what fighter pilots are like.

Question: So what was your best stunt?

Answer: Oh, let me see. I'm trying to think of what -- worse thing I ever did. I don't know, a little buzzing, I guess. What I did -- I do remember now. I was in my overseas training at Walterburg, South Carolina, and of course I lived in Georgia

Answer: And I had plotted out on the map a route from Walterburg to my home town, Tacora, Georgia

Answer: And I went up and buzzed the town one day and I never heard about it so -- well, I joked about it when I said the people in my part of the country couldn't read so they didn't -- they couldn't call the numbers in. Anyway, it wasn't that way at all, but I got away with it. I -- I buzzed the town, flew over my daddy -- my daddy ran a grocery store and I flew

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over the top of the grocery store and rolled the airplane and went on back to the base, and I don't think anybody was ever any wiser. I got away with it.

Question: But your daddy knew it was you.

Answer: Oh, yeah, he knew it was me. The whole town did, I guess. (laughs)

Question: So the beer you put in the tanks to cool it down, what type of beer did they drink over there?

Answer: Oh, I don't remember -- we got all kind of dumb stuff. Bad whiskey and other stuff, too. But I don't remember what kind of beer it was. I wasn't even a beer drinker at that time. But we were always glad to do that for the crew chiefs, carry their beer up there and get it good and cold and bring it back.

Question: What was -- what was tough to get that you would barter for over there?

Answer: I can't remember anything that was tough to get that we didn't get access to. That we couldn't get. If we couldn't get it, we didn't need it.

Question: Now I hear from some of the -- at least the bomber pilots, maybe the fighter pilots are different -- that the idea of breakfast before a mission wasn't real appetizing.

Answer: Oh, to them, to the bomber pilots you're saying that it wasn't very appetizing for them to eat breakfast?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: Yeah, well, I guess not because they -- they had more reason to be nervous than we did. They was slower and they were, you know, heavy laden and all that, and they always had a fear of those enemy fighters, and so.

Question: Now were your planes pressurized?

Answer: No, no pressurization. Boy, them things used to leak like a sieve. I got frostbitten knees while flying at 25,000, 30,000 feet.

Question: So did you have to wear, I mean they talked about --

Answer: Oh, yeah, we wore some padded suits.

Question: And a mission would be a number of hours?

Answer: Four and a half to five hours. Our longest mission was 7-1/2 hours, if you can imagine being strapped to a seat for 7-1/2 hours. I didn't go on that mission but a lot of my buddies did. Seven and a half hours, sitting in one position, weaving back and forth across the bombers.

Question: So did you remember to relieve yourself before you got in all your gear and got in the plane?

Answer: Well, it didn't help. You had to relieve yourself anyway once you got airborne, but you would always make sure. It's like my wife tell our kids, go to the bathroom before we

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take off, you know. And of course you would do that before you took off, but there was always, you know. Because there was a relief tube that was handy, you could use it if you were airborne.

Question: Anything you can think about that I haven't asked about?

Answer: Oh, I can't think of anything. I think you've covered the waterfront pretty much.

Question: What did you do after the war?

Answer: Oh, I did -- one of the things that a lot of people do. After the war -- oh, I remained in the Air Force, you see. See, I retired from the Air Force. And after retiring from the service I did several things. I sold life insurance for awhile, then as a lot of other people in the Northwest do, I worked for the Boeing Company for a year. And then after that I went to work for the government, civil service. And I worked at Equal Opportunity Office at McChord Air Force Base, and at GSA at Auburn, and finally I retired as a, oh, Deputy to the Regional Office place there at Auburn. I'm trying to remember the title now.

Question: Did you continue flying?

Answer: I just do a little flying on rare occasions. I have a friend that owns an airport out at Buckley and I go up sometimes and fly with him. But on my own, no, no flying other than the flying I do with him.

Question: Little slower plane probably.

Answer: Huh?

Question: Little slower plane than you're used to, probably.

Answer: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Except for he has the primary trainer -- he had a model of it that I flew many, many years ago. He has a model looks like it was just rolled off the factory floor. He's that meticulous. He -- one of his hobbies is restoring old airplanes. He got this restored to mint condition, PT-17. Beautiful airplane.

Question: Wow.

Answer: So I've flown that a few times.

Question: Now do the Tuskegee Airmen have a reunion or anything like that?

Answer: Every year. In fact last year we had our reunion in Indianapolis. This year we're having the reunion in Washington, D. C. It will come off next month. We -- we have an annual reunion and Washington, D.C. will be this year. Third through nine, August, I believe is the date.

Question: Wow. Are you going back?

Answer: I'm not sure yet -- haven't made up my mind. I'd like to go back but I have some other things that are going on right now that I might not be able to get away from.