

## War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Emmett Davis

Current home town: Nelsonville, Ohio

Age: Not given

I entered the Army on April 14, 1943, and was discharged in February of 1946. These are my experiences in the Army Air Force. We went by Greyhound bus from Nelsonville, Ohio, to Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio. We spent one week in Columbus and then we were all sent to different places. I shipped out to Miami Beach, Florida by train. The Government had taken over all the Hotels in Miami and that is where we stayed. We went through three and a half months basic training in very hot weather.

After the training, we were shipped by train to Bradley Field, Connecticut. Here we trained to fight crash fires (planes). We went through another three months of very rigid training. The crash crews consisted of 21: one first lieutenant, one Sergeant, one company clerk and eighteen firemen. We trained seven days a week and the only rest came at night. We were finally ready to ship out. We went by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. We spent three days packing our personal belongings in wood crates. However, when we arrived to our port in England, everything had been stolen; all we had was what we had in our barracks bags. So much for honesty!

We shipped out of New York Harbor on October 8, 1943. My nineteenth birthday, October 13, was spent on the ocean. I spent several sick days on board the ship. About the eighth day out, a German submarine got in our large convoy of approximately forty ships and three cruisers. The convoy was in a V formation, each cruiser had one plane on board. All at once, we received orders to go below deck. Before we went, we were able to see them catapult the planes from the cruisers. We never heard anything about the sub.

One night my friend and I decided to sleep on deck, which was against regulations because you weren't even allowed on deck after dark. We each got a blanket and it was just getting to be dusk when a wave soaked us! After that it was below deck for us!

We landed in Scotland on the nineteenth of October.1943. They fed us and then we were loaded on 6x6 trucks, and we rode all night. The next morning we arrived in the southern part of England, in a small town called Royston. Our field was just outside the village. It was called Nuthamstead. Each mat was 24 feet long and 2 feet wide. They interlocked to form a runway that was 48 feet wide. Later, the runway was blacktopped. We had P-38 fighters, twin tailed planes with two Allison engines.

Our quarters were in Quonset Huts. They were half-round metal buildings 40 feet long and 18 feet wide. We had one potbelly stove in each hut for heat. Each hut received one hundred pound bags of coke, a by-product of coal, once a month. There were eighteen men to each hut, we took turns scrapping up wood or cardboard to keep warm after the coke was gone. We usually slept in our clothes with our overcoats on top of us for warmth. Each hut had a spigot on the outside that served as our washing facilities. Later we fixed a hut where we could bathe and shave.

They assigned each of us jobs; mine was crash truck driver. We were at this base about four months. One night, the Jerries (that's what we called the Germans) bombed our field; the runways mostly. The next day, every man turned out to fix the runway. We filled the holes, they rolled them, and the Army's engineers blacktopped them. Anyway, our fighters shot down the Jerries and we got to see that.

In late November, I got very sick and ended up in the 65<sup>th</sup> General Hospital for six weeks. The second week I was back, we got orders to pack; they were splitting us up and sending us to another base. The reason we found out later: on a bomber base not far from us a crash crew had been killed when a B-17 blew up. Half of us went to this bomber base. I was lucky, I was sent to another fighter base. It was called Debden. This was a peace time base for the British.

Here is some history about our Air Field: During the Blitz of London in 1940 many Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) Spitfire and Hurricane (they were British Fighters) took off from Debden Air Field. This is also the night a German Bomber dropped a bomb on our east-to-west runway (this caused a rise in the runway, which I elaborate on later). Also the President's wife Eleanor Roosevelt visited here. According to History, in 1941 a German Bomber landed on this field; it was lost due to fog. They thought they had landed on a French Air Field and when they learned the truth, they took off. And according to my book, they were shot down over the channel.

We had very good runways at Debden, they turned it over to the Americans in 1942, and we had P-51 Mustang Fighters. Our group was called the Eagle Squadron; the pilots joined the Canadian Air Force before the U.S. got in the war. Our pilots wore British wings on the left side and American wings on the right side. I've learned the history about our American pilots who joined the British Air Force from a 1942 Life Magazine I have. The American Fliers of R.A.F. Eagle Squadrons, which had begun fighting ten months before Pearl Harbor, were taken into the U.S. Army Air Force on September 29, 1942. There were three squadrons numbered by the British: 71<sup>st</sup> squadron, 121<sup>st</sup> squadron and 133<sup>rd</sup> squadron. Each squadron averaged twenty-eight pilots. Only four of the original thirty-four pilots were on hand. A hundred men were missing; killed in action or on accident; or prisoners of the Germans. Half a dozen had come down over Europe due to bad weather.

Now, for my experience as a firefighter: We spent 24 hours on the flight line duty, 24 hours in the fire department and 24 hours off duty. In case of an emergency, everybody worked. While on duty at the fire station we would dry fire hose, check all fire extinguishers on bases, and make sure all the equipment was working okay. Being a peace time air field, we had up-to-date runways. If planes were in trouble we took care of them. On D-Day, all firemen were on duty. My truck and crew were on the flight line.

Our planes were taking off on an escort mission for B-17 bombers. Each P-51 had two 500-pound bombs under each wing. Suddenly, one of the bombs came off and rolled to the edge of the runway. The control tower called on our field phone to get one of us to roll it off the runway. One of our crew rolled the bomb to the edge of the fields.

We were on the flight line at 2:30am on D-Day. The bombs were safe, they had to be dropped by air to activate them due to a fan in the head that was triggered when dropped. Our P-51s flew three missions that day loaded with five hundred pounds.

On the flight line when the planes were on a mission over Germany, we would pass the time by playing cards or playing volleyball with the plane's crew chief. And maybe once in a while, we would get a pass into town for the evening. Our Commanding Officer, Colonel Donald Blakeslee from Fairport Harbor, Ohio was a WWII Ace.

Well, this one time I got a pass to go into town, and as I was leaving the base, I met a pilot from Athens, Ohio. I was at the main gate thumbing a ride when a Jeep pulled up. An officer inquired, "Where you going, Soldier?" I told him I was going into town to have a beer. I got in the Jeep and realized I had forgotten my wallet back at the barracks and asked if the driver could stop so I could go back and get my wallet. However, instead of letting me out of the Jeep, the officer said, "You don't need any money tonight; I may get killed tomorrow, so we will all have a good time tonight!" His name was Major Howard (Deacon) Hively. He told me he was from Athens and I told him I was from Nelsonville, Ohio. He then told me he had married a Beasley girl. Then he told me to drop the "Sir stuff" because tonight he was just "the Deacon." He was a swell fellow! Major Hively had a brother, Sergeant Bill Hively from Columbus, Ohio. He was stationed in Sardinia Italy.

Now this is when I met another pilot from Dayton, Ohio. His name was Major Don Gentile and he was a War World Two Ace on his last mission. We were sitting next to the control tower in the crash truck when we saw all these dignitaries, photographers, General Eisenhower and General Spatz pull up in Jeeps. We wondered what was going on. Suddenly our phone rang and they told us to go to the intersection of the runway, there was a plane coming in. The pilot was going to make a couple of low passes over the runways. My crew chief asked who it was and they told him it was Major Don Gentile on his last mission over Germany. The photographer wanted to get some pictures and he might return home to sell war bonds. Anyway, he came down low over the runways. The control tower called up to him about giving one more buzz job. This time he came a little lower to the runway and his plane crashed. We followed him to the end of the runway where there was barbed wire that stood 10 feet high and 40 feet wide to keep the enemy out. When we got to him, he was sitting on the wing of his plane with coils of barbed wire surrounding him. He asked, "Where the h-- of you guys been?" Then he laughed!

Years later, at an Eagle Squadron Reunion, my wife and I met his Father and sister in Dayton, Ohio. He was killed testing planes in the USA right after he came home. When I met Gentile's father years later after the war, I was working in Dayton, Ohio. My friend and I went into town one evening and I spotted a bar called Gentile Bar. We went in and I talked to the Barmaid and she told me that was Major Gentile's Father's bar. She said he would be in the next night. So I went in the next night and was able to meet him. I told him I would bring him some pictures his son and I had taken in England, and he was more than grateful. I gave him the pictures and he cried and talked about his son all evening. You talk about good Italian food! Every evening when we stopped at his place he'd feed us the best Italian food for free.

This is another experience with plane crashes. We were at the intersection of the east and west runway. This runway had a rise in it due to a bombing in the 1940s by the Germans. When the runway was repaired, they left the rise in it where the bomb had hit. When a plane took off, if a plane was too close to another plane on takeoff, the prop would cause the second plane to drop down and hit the riser. The rise in the runway was dangerous for planes. This is what happened this day: the second plane crashed and exploded. Luckily, we were able to save the pilot. However, we almost lost our lives because the ammunition kept exploding as we fought the fire. They say you are about to die and your life passes before your eyes – a I know mine did!

Well, we finally got a pass to go into London. My friend and I walked into a night, through a door that had to be tightly closed, then through curtains or drapes because of blackouts. As we walked in, a man called out and asked where we were from. My friend said New Jersey and I said Ohio. He asked me how close I was to New Straitsville. Believe it or not they had New Straitsville Whiskey! At eleven O'clock that night the Germans bombed the city. Plaster rained down in our room. At 11:30 pm that night we were on our way back to the base.

One more trip to London, this time to Piccadilly Circus. We check in at the American Red Cross, they had a huge book at the main desk. The soldiers used to write messages to each other in it. I always looked for my name. This day, there was a message and it was from a man from my town. His name was Crawford. It seems somebody in my family told his family that I was in the Eighth Air Force in England. So he was trying to contact me, but we never met. We sent messages to each other in the book each time we were in London.

My friend and I headed back to camp the next morning. When we got on the train, we met a couple of girls. It was love at first sight for me. She was a beautiful blond. I talked her out of her phone number. I called her up later and made a date. I met her family, and six months later we were married. Her brother, who was in the Navy, suggested one night that we trade uniforms and go out pubbing, which we did. I tried to talk like the English and he tried to talk like an American. We had a barrel of fun that night. Good thing no Military Police came around. My wife and I had three beautiful children. We were married 35 years when she passed away.

One day we were on duty, our crash truck was parked beside the control tower and the Crew's chief had the field phone on. A call came from a plane wanting to know if there were any planes in hanger 334. The control said he didn't know. He said go check. We had no idea what was going on. They called back and told him no planes were in the hanger. Believe it or not the pilot flew his plane through the hanger – “crazy.”

Another time – I read this in one of his newsletters we got every quarter – this pilot took a stick of chalk and fastened it on a 6 ft. or 8 ft. flat stock, pulled his canopy back, flew upside down and marked a line down the runway. I read about a pilot chasing a Jerry under the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France. He said he got him.

Another story about our brave pilots: This happened over Berlin. This story came out of my book “Eagle Squadron 1000 Destroyed.” One of our planes had been hit by flak. Flak is a shell when it bursts in the

sky and spews metal out. This can destroy a plane if it hits right. This pilot, McKennon, was going down. When he bailed out, his parachute got tangled on the canopy of his plane. He finally got loose and jumped, but the plane crashed and burned. Another pilot, named Green, decided he was going to land and pick up his buddy, even though he knew if he were to fail he would be taken prisoner and if he succeeded, he would be court-martialed. As he was going down he saw the Germans with dogs going after McKennon. He radioed up to the other pilots to strike the Germans. They killed the Germans and he was able to land his one-man plane and made room for his friend by throwing off the parachutes and may west (which is a life jacket); he even took off his boots! McKennon threw his helmet out and also his oxygen mask. He passed out when they reached 10,000 ft. They both used green oxygen masks all the way back. I was on duty when they landed. Needless to say, Green wasn't court-martialed. They said one thing you learn in Cadet School, "Don't Smoke within 50 ft. of a plane," McKennon and Green smoked 2 packs that day on the plane ride back.

Another Ohio pilot I met was Major Rinbolt from Sidney, Ohio. We got a call about a plane that had its hydraulic system shot out, which means the wheels wouldn't work and he would have to "belly land." When he crashed his plane caught fire. We were able to get him out okay. That was the day my whiskers got singed. Years later, my wife and I met him at an Air Force Reunion. After the war Rinbolt became a lawyer then a judge.

After the war was over we rotated home on the point system. What the point system was if you did something over and beyond the call of duty you got more points. Our job was strictly crash crew, we didn't get extra points. Since I could not come home, I volunteered at a bomber base in the control tower. We ferried food by B-17 and B-24 to Germany and Holland. Eventually I got enough points to come home. I was discharged in February of 1946 at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania.

Our Eagle Squadron was the highest scoring group in the E.T.O. We destroyed 1,052 planes. As a soldier and a fireman in War World II, we didn't kill, we saved lives and broke a few hearts along the way. This is my story as a soldier.

