

George Pifko
Narrator

Interviewed by Herkimer County Community College

George Pifko: Hello. My name is George Pifko. I was born in Brooklyn. I lived in New York for the biggest part of my life. By 1939-1940 I left NY to go to Connecticut to work. We had all the wool work, and there I could act and I had a very good job. In 1941 Pearl Harbor happened. I sent a letter to my third draft ward to find out what my status was. I found out immediately. I immediately got a notice that "You have been selected." I keep wondering sometimes whether I should've ever sent that letter. From there I was drafted, I was sent to Camp Upton where I was written up in the U.S. Army. I enlisted for the infantry. I did my basic training in the South. I was assigned to the 45th division, message center unit, 157th battalion. And there I stayed until I finished our training. We were set to go overseas. About that time, the word came, we were not going overseas. Also, I noticed on the bulletin boards that they were looking for fliers. They wanted pilots, bombardiers, navigators. And all your requirement was that you had two years of college, and you could qualify for it. You could pass a two-year college equivalency test. Which I did, fortunately or unfortunately, depends on how you figure. I was transferred from whatever camp it was to Westover Field, Massachusetts. And there I was sent to the Air force Academy in San Antonio, Texas. I finished my basic training in San Antonio. I went to primary training where I immediately flunked out. They did not need pilots anymore. So I went with 75% of my class – out. Most of us were fortunate enough to qualify for bombardiering or navigation. I chose bombardiering. It was a shorter course. I wanted to get into combat sooner. I finished my course; I was commissioned a lieutenant on December 3rd, 1943. Then from there, I went to Florida, where we assembled a crew; I was a bombardier of our crew. And I also happened to have a Radiance Navigator, which, on my first missions overseas, I flew more navigation than I did bombardiering.

Interviewer: You were overseas and you flew navigation. Now, when were you assigned to a group?

GP: That was in February. In February of 1944.

I: Which group?

GP: Well that was just assigned to go overseas. We weren't assigned until we got over. Before we got overseas I was assigned to the 99th... 240th Squadron. I flew 12 missions successfully. On my 13th mission I was shut down. From there we actually were hit over Vienna. Our crippled plane made it as far as Yugoslavia. We were very fortunate that we were not jumped by fighters, because being hit and crippled you were usually a "dead duck". We made it to... where I was captured by the Croats. From the Croats I was turned over to the Germans who turned us over to the Hungarians, and then back to the Germans. I had a final interrogation in Budapest, Hungary. There I was Stalag Luft III POW camp in Germany. That was on July 26th. I stayed at Stalag Luft III until February

28th when we were suddenly all alerted, and we evacuated the camp because The Russians at that time were crossing... which was not far from the camp. We would have been freed by the Russians and the Germans wanted to keep all their prisoners as much as they could. Whatever purpose they needed us. Now, within the prison camp our treatment was pretty good. We were very fortunate that we were fliers. Commissioned officers, fliers were given very good treatment. We had no forced labor and none of the atrocities that I know of that some other people had at other camps. We were very fortunate in Stalag Luft III. When we left Stalag Luft III we went to Nuremberg. Which was Stammlager 13A, and that was in Nuremberg. We stayed there from February through April. In the beginning of April they marched us out to Moosburger. That was Stammlager 7A, and there we stayed until we were liberated by Patton's 3rd division. And that was the end of my POW days. While we were on the march once we left Stalag Luft III, times were pretty rough. Food was very low. Medical and care was non-existent. We survived mostly on our own needs. We had fellows that were college students when they came in; they were medical student who took care of our chemical needs, and so on and so forth. Anybody who had a craft, his craft was used at some time. Escape methods or anything like that. Or any means of survival, any means to increase the use of our rations or any materials we could get.

I have a little photo here of my family. They were in the military from the time they first came over to this country. My father Mike served from 1914-1919 during World War I. Myself, I served in the Air Corps from 1943-1945. My son, who was a major in the Vietnam War doing artillery, served from 1967-1970. And my granddaughter who is presently in the military. She serves in the Air Corps as a captain, and she is also married to a captain in the Air Corps. They are both serving in Colorado presently. That's the history of my family. As for myself the day I was commissioned, I was commissioned as second lieutenant in the U.S. air force. That was December 3rd of 1943. And here's a picture of the beginnings of a crew that lasted 13 missions overseas. Now here I have listed the days as I started to keep a diary. The things that happened that were of importance to me or that I remembered or had time to put down as close to the time that the occasions occurred. A lot of them were just days and different towns and units we walked through in Germany on our marches from Sargon to Nuremberg to Moosburger, where we were finally liberated by General Patton's 3rd Army on April 28th of 1935. This is the flying duck of Stalag Luft III. It symbolizes every young fella who went into the Air Corps and wanted to fly a combat mission, and resulted in his incarceration in Stalag Luft III when his missions were completed by getting shot down over Europe. This would symbolize any pilot, copilot, bombardier, whatever, that flew and was taken prisoner, and was still alive. Some of the fellas here are listed that I knew in the camp. They came from different states. Co-pilot...He flew 11 missions. He was shot down in his 11th. He comes from Massachusetts... He comes from California... He comes from Midland, Texas. And these are all over. There's no two from any one state in the same crew. They're all from all over the states. I want to think skimming manuals a thing of real enjoyment. It consisted of real goodies. We started out in the morning with orange juice, royal spam, hawaiianese potatoes. For lunch we had roast rabbit, Italian spuds, upside down ginger chocolate cake and coffee. For dinner we had chicken bouillon, roast

turkey with potatoes,... lettuce, and all the trimmings with mall cake and coffee. Of course these things were all falsified because we had none of these nutrients. Strictly imitations. The only meat we had was spam. Potatoes were all powdered, and they were saved from weeks before. In fact all the ingredients from these menus were saved from weeks before, they were not a day's ration or anything like that. And this is the menu; it was made by Harry Gucher. That's it.

I: Can you describe that last mission, and what circumstances led up to it?

GP: On the last mission we were shot down. Our mission was over... air drone in Austria. We flew to the mission, we dropped out bombs, and then in getting off the target we got hit by flack, and we got hit heavy. We lost two engines, one engine was on fire. We immediately left the squadron and went out on our own. We tried to unload the ship as much as we could and tried to make it back to the Adriatic Sea were we could possibly be rescued by the Air-Sea Rescue. We were very fortunate we were not jumped or followed by fighters. We made it as far as..., Yugoslavia, where the mountains stopped us, we couldn't go any further. And we had to jump at a certain point it was..., Yugoslavia. As I jumped, I as next to the last one out of the plane, my chute did not open. I had to actually claw my chute open. I was fortunate I had a chest chute instead of a back chute. When I jumped I pulled the handle, and there it was in my hand, and the pack was still on my chest. I had to claw it open to get it out. And as it popped open, I hit the ground at the same time. A fraction of a second later and I would've been dead. So that was my gift from God for that day. We were captured by the Croatians of course and then turned over to the Germans.

I: Can you remember any happy moments while you were in service?

GP: Well happy moments, the happiest moment was when we were liberated. Up to that time it was misery. But we did a lot of things; we kept active, we did a lot of reading, we did a lot of scheming. We tried out with the guard at every turn. Having a radio in the corners was a sin. We had one; we used to pass it from block to block. And we'd befriend some of the ferrets, which were the guard, we called them ferrets, and they would tip us off when there was going to be a barracks search. And that way we were able to keep our equipment moving to places where it would be safe instead of being caught with it.

I: Were there any moments that were more memorable than others?

GP: Well, the most memorable moment was the first letter I got from home, which was in October, which was three months after I got shot down. That was just the time my family found out that I was still alive. Up to that time they had no record that I was alive. All it was was missing in action. My father got my air medal in New York from the Air Corps. And it was awarded posthumously. He of course was very proud, because of being a solder himself. Of course the happiest moment of all was when we saw that first G.I. coming down the block with a rifle across his chest and a tank behind him. That was a day of liberation.

I: I noticed you have a family picture there...?

GP: Yew we do. And from myself and my wife, this is what has happened in all those years. There's 26 of us there. We have four children, eight grand children, and five great grand children. Now my wife was also involved in the war. She was one of those workers, Rosie the Riveter they called her? She used to operate the machine that manufactures spark plugs from putting in the engines.

I: Do you think she would sit there and tell us about that?

GP: I think she'd be very happy to.