



YOUR FREE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

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12/21/2005

Capture Living History: Ralph Zimmerman served America in the Royal Air Force

By Carl Kelly

Part nine of a continuing series.

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"I joined the Air Force because I wanted to fly. It's as simple as that, thanks to Charles Lindberg when he crossed the Atlantic in 1926. So, I set my goals accordingly. You had to have two years of college to get into the Army Air Corps in those days, so I did that. And finally was able to get into the military."

He needed money to go to college, so he spent 1936 and 1937 playing professional baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals, earning \$25 a month as a pitcher. Commenting on those years he said, "I won a few games."

After college he joined the U.S. Army Air Corps, but ended up in the British Royal Air Force. "England was very short of pilots and the United States wanted to help England, but they had to be very careful," he explained. "They couldn't send any military. So, we went through an accelerated training and they assigned 22 of us to the Royal Air Force. We wore their uniform and were paid by them, even though we were U.S. reserves. We were never identified as Americans."

He praised the English for their tenacity and stoicism. "They never quit," he said, then added, "They were wonderful people, terrific people. We couldn't go anywhere or buy anything that somebody didn't pick up the tab for you. They were absolutely wonderful people."

"My first mission was not much of a mission," he remembered. "I was a pathfinder." Pathfinders flew ahead of the bombers at about 12,000 feet. "We'd drop flares on the path to the target and light up the target. The bombers would follow us. We'd circle the target. The British bombers would come in and bomb the area, take about 25 minutes. Then, we'd come back in and light up the target again."

Later in the war he piloted bombers. One of his planes, The Rose of York, was dedicated by the Duchess of York, in a ceremony attended by many U.S. and British dignitaries.

"I had a lot of good friends," he said. Then, he paused. "Lost a lot of them. People say don't get close. But, I didn't see any reason not to get close. If you like somebody, you get close. If they don't make it, you hate to see that happen. But, that shouldn't stop you from being friends with them." Again, he paused. "Everybody I flew with is gone."

Zimmerman also was shot down several times. "I had to ditch in the North Sea in November of '42," he said. "We were picked up by an English boat. I was also shot down in March 1945 and was picked up by the 8th Army." He traveled with the 8th a while, saw the liberation of Bergin-Belson, then was put on a plane to return to England.

Despite their being the enemy, Zimmerman gained a high regard for the Germans. "They were great fighter pilots. They'd come in head on, then they'd kind of roll over and hang as they went by, and shoot you down. But, they were very, very good."

On one mission he was injured, and his co-pilot and others were killed. There were only three left alive on the four-hour return. "We were flying about 700 feet," he recalled. "The Germans were trying to shoot us down. When they saw how badly we were shot up the three German fighters flew by and gave a sign to say, good luck. They were decent people." Then, the German fighters left them to fly home. "It kind of chokes me up to talk about it."

He landed the plane on her belly as he couldn't get the landing gear down. He had to be cut out of the plane and was taken to the hospital with several injuries: one bullet through his back and hip, another through his lung. That was Sept. 5, 1943. Zimmerman left the hospital in March, 1944 and returned to flying.

Asked to talk about the danger he chuckled, "Well, they were shooting at us. You always got hit, flack or something. It was something you got used to." He claimed he's a survivor and never questioned whether he would get home. And, as a survivor he made piloting for the U.S. Air Force his career.

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