

**Veteran:** VICTORY, Luther  
**Service Branch:** AIR FORCE  
**Interviewer:** Singh, Bobby  
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**Highlights of Service:** World War II; B-17 Tailgunner; Staff Sergeant/ Armored 1<sup>st</sup> Class Aerial Gunner; German POW—Stalag 17 in Austria

Interviewer: How old were you when went into the war effort?

Veteran: Eighteen.

Interviewer: Were you drafted, or did you volunteer?

Veteran: Volunteered. December 7<sup>th</sup> was when Japan attacked Hawaii, and I tried to enlist on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the next day. I was told I wasn't old enough, so I had to wait until May of '42. I had to get my birth certificate changed, which you can do—it's no big problem. All you do is get three people to sign a statement that you were born on a certain day, and there you go—they'd change your birth certificate. I went in on May 26, 1942.

Interviewer: Was there more volunteering going on, or were more people drafted?

Veteran: No, no. You couldn't hardly get near a recruitment place because it was so overloaded. Everybody wanted to go in.

Interviewer: What was the morale of people that were going off to war?

Veteran: Great.

Interviewer: What were some of your experiences during your training?

Veteran: I was in the Air Force, and you went through basic training, which was two armory schools—machine guns and all that good stuff, and I went to an aerial gunnery school.

Interviewer: How long did the training last?

Veteran: Totally a little over a year.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to Europe?

Veteran: I sure did.

Interviewer: How long was the time period between your training and when you went overseas?

Veteran: We went through two schools, then were assigned to a crew and spent three months out in West Texas—they called it OTU—Overseas Training Unit. From there, we flew to Scotland. I was a tailgunner on a B-17 bomber, and I was stationed with the 306 Bomb Group, 369<sup>th</sup> Squadron. The crew missioned over Germany dropping bombs, and I was shot down on my seventh mission. I was a prisoner of war for thirteen months. Seemed like thirteen years.

Interviewer: What prison camp were you at?

Veteran: I was in Stalag 17-B. That was in Crims, Austria. That's on the Danube, and we were up on a 5,000 foot mountain. The Russians took Vienna, and we marched about 400 miles through the Austrian Alps to Bavaria, which is in the southwest part of Germany.

Interviewer: What were the living quarters like in England?

Veteran: They called them Nielsen huts—just big, odd shaped tin buildings with some cots and an old pot bellied stove in the middle of it. That was it. It wasn't much.

Interviewer: After being a prisoner, what was the morale coming back to America?

Veteran: It was great to get home.

Interviewer: After you got into the war, was it a shock to see what you saw?

Veteran: It was a shock. Your introduction to combat is not too good. I got to this 306 Bomb Group one night about nine, and they woke me up about two o'clock in the morning to fly as a replacement tailgunner on a crew. BANG! I was over Germany and into Poland. The squadron has about sixteen planes, and I think we lost about eight planes that day. It was like Dante's Inferno—it was like hell.

Planes were blowing up and disappearing from flack hitting you. Finally, we went over our target in Austria at about 8,000 feet—that's where we got all the damage—and finally got through there and got over the North Sea and were about a hundred feet over the water. I saw a B-17 coming up behind us, and the whole nose of that damn plane had been blown off. The bombardier was strapped in with his head gone, and the navigator was dead and slumped over something. They got right in behind me, and so there we went over the North Sea and I was looking at these two dead people. I thought, 'deliver me from this!' So, that was my introduction to war, and every mission was like that. The mission I was shot down was the worst loss of planes. We lost eleven that day out of sixteen.

Interviewer: Tell me about that day. What was going on?

Veteran: We took off and got over Germany, and that's when all hell breaks loose. You've got flack, and here comes a fighter plane trying to shoot you down, and the target for that day is way down in Bavaria near Munich. The target was an aircraft assembly for ME 109s—fighter planes, but we didn't even make it there. You never think you're gonna be shot down, but you do, and it came as a big surprise to me. It's a lengthy story, but when you're getting shot down it's every man for himself. I was the tailgunner and had two ammunition boxes on the side, and ammunition was everywhere, and a big old thick plate glass window that you looked out of had been blown out. I thought, 'God---n, what am I into here?' I was trying to get untangled, and here came this, "BAIL OUT—BAIL OUT," and I thought we had a co-pilot with a high pitched voice, but it was him getting scared. I didn't pay too much attention to it, because I was trying to get loose myself, and I saw these four parachutes go by, and thought, "Who in the hell's that?" Then here come two more, and I thought, "Who in the hell got shot down?" It was the top officer that jumped out first. That was the top turret gunner—he was the engineer and radio operator. That left the ball turret, two waist gunners, and myself, and I finally had enough sense to realize what was happening. The pilot was the one that scared and had that high pitched voice. I looked up towards the waist and thought everybody was dead up there. We were at about 36,000 feet, and so I crawled up there. The two waist gunners were still alive. I snapped chest packs on them and opened the waist down and put them

out and put my hand on the ripcord. When I looked over, the ball turret gunner's guns were down, and he couldn't get out because the electrical system had gone out. So I hand cranked him up, and he came out of that thing like a bullet and grabbed his chute. To this day, every time he sees me he gets to crying. It was a hell of a deal getting shot down like that. It's a long drawn out thing. So many things happen to you that you think you couldn't survive them, but you can. You hear so many stories that they sound like they're made up, but they're not. I could go on for hours, but it wouldn't serve any useful purpose. I was hung in Frankfurt after we got captured and went to some big airbase. We were there about three or four days, and they put us on a train one night and were going to Frankfurt. We got to Frankfurt the next morning—there were ten of us—and the British had bombed the marshalling yards (the train yards), so it wasn't anything but bricks and steel girders. There were a bunch of workers that were trying to get rid of this rubble, and when they saw us and since we still had our uniforms on, they thought we were the ones that had bombed them, but we weren't. We had three guards and there was ten of us, and they knocked us down and kicked us and beat on us, and finally put a noose around my neck and threw it over a big girder. If you've ever done any climbing, you can get a little advantage if you wrap it around and come out here and catch some of the shock. I thought I was dead, but fortunately they didn't bind it. They just threw the noose around my neck and threw it around the girder, and up I went, but I was hanging on. When they'd drop you, you'd hang tight and it would stop you about that far from the ground. Anyhow, after about the fourth or fifth time that happened, I thought, "Man, I'm gonna die." One of the guards fired some shots over their heads and they quit. I sure thought I had a broken neck, but I didn't. I went to the interrogation place, and that wasn't a very nice place. From there we rode a boxcar—German boxcars are little cars, not like ours. They'd cram about fifty of us in maybe one half of it and have four or five guards in the other half. There was about ten carloads like that. You couldn't sit down, and it was a dirty, dirty place. People were doing doo-doo and urinating everywhere. I almost got my leg cut off on one of the sliding doors. After a day of that, I couldn't stand it because it was so terrible, so I noticed that when the guards had to urinate they'd unlatch the thing on the door and slide the door back and stand out their and

urinate, so I thought, “that’s where I’m gonna get loose.” So, I waited until it was real dark. We were up in the Alps, and I waited until the guard opened the door and started urinating, and I kicked him in the butt as hard as I could. That damn train lurched back towards me and that guy fell backwards on top of me. He was a big guy, about six foot five and weighed about three hundred and something pounds, and he had me pinned where my leg was hanging out the door. Here come the other three guards a-hollering and a-screaming and kept trying to close that door and were closing it on my damn leg. Finally, one of them had enough sense to get a flashlight and saw what the problem was. I thought they’d cut my leg off. Hurt? Mmm. Anyhow, they finally drug me back in and beat me up pretty good. But we were on that train for four days. Oh, man, you talk about a stinking bunch of guys, we were. Then we got out and had about an eight mile walk from Crims to the Danube up to the top of that mountain, and that was one tough walk with me and that busted and crushed leg. I liked to have never made it up there, but I did. Anyhow, the main thing about a prison camp is the starvation. I know for five months there was no breakfast. At ten o’clock you got a ration of bread, which was two little thin, small pieces of bread with sawdust in it. You could pick the damn pieces of wood out of it. At noon, you got a can of watery rutabaga soup, and no supper. Seven days a week for five months. You talk about losing weight. I think totally I probably lost about a hundred pounds. I know afterwards when I weighed in in Le Havre, France, I weighed 96 pounds. Anyhow, we finally got some Red Cross parcels every Friday for about three weeks, and that was the end of that until sometime in January. That was in September, and by October snow was rump deep and cold. When you’d get to the main camp you were in, they’d take all your flying gear. I had these heavy fleece-lined boots on, and they took those, so I didn’t have any shoes. I just had socks on after they took my shoes, G.I. under shorts, a G.I. shirt, G.I. pants, and a helmet liner. That’s a little wool cap that fits on your head to kind of cushion the steel helmet. They’d give you a baby blanket. You talk about cold. God---n, I like to have froze to death. Right before Christmas, the Red Cross shipped a shipment of G.I. blankets. Everybody got one, and they had one left over for each barracks that held two hundred men. I won that sucker with the ace of spades. I went from nothing to two blankets, but we had no heat.

There was no coal. I hear people talking about you got so many buckets of coal a day. That's a crock of s—t, because my bunk was right by the stove. They were three high—two here, two here, two here, and two here. The one I was in was only two high, and there was just two here and two here, because there was four of us. I'll tell you a funny one, and you may not want to print it. I got so hungry beginning in October, and like I say snow was about so deep, because we were in the Austrian Alps. Red Cross parcels came in cardboard boxes. I was sitting there one day, and I had a flat piece of cardboard I was saving, because you never threw anything away because there was no fire, but every once in awhile you could make a little fire with the cardboard. So I thought, "Damn, I can eat that cardboard," so tore up that cardboard into little pieces and ate it. The human body does not digest glucose. You didn't have too many bowel movements since you weren't getting fed. We had this big old outdoor latrine. In this big compound, it was about a twenty-holer with ten on each side for about a thousand people. So on the fourteenth day, my belly was bulging out, and I hadn't a bowel movement and I thought I was going to die. They had a first aid place, so I went up there and they had two things: castor oil and methiolade. That was the sum total of the hospital they had there. So I went up there and told the guy, and he gave me a shot of castor oil and said, "That'll fix you up." I went back to the barracks, and nothing, so I went back there that afternoon and said, "Give me two shots," and so he gave me two shots. On the third day I went up there and said, "I'm gonna die if I don't do something," and so he brought out this big old bottle of castor oil, and said, "I'll drink that damn thing." He said, "It'll kill you," and I said, "Well, I'm gonna die if I don't, because something's gotta bust." So I drank a whole bunch of castor oil—you just can't imagine. Had this big old bottle, and I drank about half of it. I went back to the barracks and laid there, and all of a sudden I had the urge to go. I jumped up and ran outside and there was no vacancy. I just pulled one guy off of one of them holes and sat down, and you talk about noise. That cardboard came out just like it went down. It tore my rump apart, and I could see my belly going down with just one big long fart. Everybody got up and was looking, but I didn't give a damn because I could see my belly going down. But that taught me not to eat cardboard. But you could do some crazy things like that. You're there day after day after day with the same

people and nothing to do except freeze to death and starve to death. That was a big camp I was in. They had about forty-two hundred American fliers. We were segregated off, and the other compound was about twenty-five or twenty-six thousand mixed soldiers. There was Russians, Italians, French, English, and man they died over there because they had a big epidemic of typhus. There was ten or fifteen of them a day dying. Every morning they'd cart them out there on stretchers. We had a cemetery down at the far end of that place, and I just knew that typhus was going to jump over where we were and get to us, but it never did, because I guess we'd been vaccinated for it. I was so glad we'd taken all our booster shots before we went overseas, because when we got over to England, guess what? My medical records got lost, and I had to take all those shots again. But I was so glad when I got to prison that I'd had all those shots. I had pneumonia and nearly died in there. There wasn't any medical treatment. If you got sick, you either got well or you died—one of the two. On April 9<sup>th</sup>, they said the Russians were coming and were in Vienna. We were northwest of Vienna up in the mountains, and we were told we were gonna move out the next day. They gave us each a Red Cross parcel, and I finally got a pair of shoes—finally. I like to have lost both big toes from frostbite. I lost the tip of my nose—you can see that little dent there. Anyhow, we left and walked about four hundred miles through the Alps into Bavaria. We started out with four thousand and wound up with about two thousand. You can imagine being starved down to about a hundred pounds for a year or two, and—whew—that was a long trip I know for sure. What was bad, every third day you got a can of that rutabaga, which is like a turnip, soup and three slices of bread, and the last eight days, we didn't have anything. Everybody just finally got exhausted. We stopped in some woods up on some mountain near a place where Hitler was born—I can't remember the name now—but we were there for about five or six days, and one day here come a jeep—May 2<sup>nd</sup>. There was a captain with a driver and he said, “What in the hell are ya'll doing here?” He said they were an advanced scout party, and they turned around and left. Remember the Germans were still there with their guns. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, here come another jeep with Lt. Colonel Downey, who was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, 13<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and when the Germans put their guns down, we took 'em then. Like I said, we hadn't eaten anything in eight days, and he said

just a short way down the road there was a quarter master thing there. We all took off, and that short way was twenty miles, but sure enough when we got there they had these K-rations, and within thirty minutes I think we'd eaten everything they had. You've heard about army ants eating up everything, that's what we did. At a landing field there where they were dropping off supplies to the quarter master—it was just a farm field—this C-47 would take us back about ten of us back at a time. We flew from there to outside of Le Havre, France, and we were there for a few days. We got de-loused, and the way they did that was to spray you with DDT—I mean they covered you with DDT. Some of them got clothes, and some of them didn't. There was just too many of us, so I didn't get any clothes. I wore the soles out of those shoes I'd gotten. Finally, we went down to the harbor at Le Havre, and they put about ten of us in the hole of a liberty ship. When we docked, they put a board down from the deck, and I had to back down it, and the people on the dock were laughing because I was backing down. I didn't want to fall. The harbor master that was in charge of unloading people wanted to know who in the hell we were, and when we told him, he called a truck up and they took us out to an army base, and man, they give me some clothes. The harbor master had commented on how raggedy we were, and I told him we'd been wearing these clothes for thirteen or fourteen months. The first place we went was San Antonio, and when we got there we were wearing heavy wool clothes in June. It took me about four or five months to get out of the service. I didn't have any records, and they wouldn't even let me into Lackland Air Force Base, because all I had was some orders to report there. They just told me to go home, and they'd call me. I guess it was in November when I got out, and I still wasn't getting paid either. I finally got to see the commanding office—a Col. Johnson—and he said, "Son, you don't have any papers. There's no proof." I said, "Man, you can look at me. If you've got somebody that can type, I've got a good memory, and we'll make out a discharge," and said, "Do it." So I made out my own service record, and down at the bottom of that thing—which killed me—it said, "Based on enlisted man's statement." When I went down to get paid, I had about \$3,000 coming, and the guy that was in charge wouldn't pay me. He said there wasn't any G.I. that ever had that much money, so they finally got Col. Johnson down there, and he had to sign for me to get paid. And to top it off, I



took it to First National Bank in San Antonio, and they put it in one of my brother's bank accounts—not mine. I liked to have never got that straightened out. I found out many years after I got out of the service that only about twenty-five percent of those that flew missions over Germany survived. I think out of all the airplanes that were in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, there was twenty-six thousand MIAs (missing in action), POWs like me, and there was twenty-eight thousand killed, so out of every hundred, twenty-five made it. They don't tell you that when you're in training. Too, you never think that anything bad will ever happen to you, but it sure does. You can take an airplane that'll take a direct hit, and if it's got a full bomb load, it ain't nothing but a puff of smoke. I lost a lot of good friends. But, anyway, that's what it was like.

Interviewer: What were some of the main weapons you saw during the war?

Veteran: 30 caliber machine gun. You sat on a little old bicycle seat. You had to kneel down, and there was a piece of armor plating about like that and it saved my life. You had to reach around there to get to your 50 caliber machine gun, and one of them malfunctioned. To get to them, you had to lift this big heavy piece of steel and get underneath it. I was under there trying to get the thing open where I could unblock the cartridges in it, and that's when I took those hits in the tail. If I had been sitting up there I wouldn't have had no head left, because it was directly next to the big piece of Plexiglas. They said it was bullet proof, but it wasn't. That saved my life, though, because I was wrapped up in ammunition. They called me an Armored 1<sup>st</sup> Class Aerial Gunner. I wound up a staff sergeant. When I was getting out, there was a recruiter there and he said, "Hey, how about reenlisting?" And I said, "No, I don't think so." He said, "I'll make you a tech sergeant," and I said, "You could make me a four-star general. I'm getting out." I had a good time when I was back here in the states, but it was time to get out. I was a civilian—I wasn't a career army guy, but a lot of them stayed in. I got out on October 21 and enrolled at Baylor University December 3<sup>rd</sup>—my birthday.

Interviewer: Did you have a lot of interaction with the regular soldiers or just basically with the air groups?

Veteran: No, I never came in contact with any professional soldiers. There were all about like me—just volunteers. When the Vietnam War was going on, I was chairman of the Draft Board here from 1960 to 1970, and it was even tough to get people drafted. There wasn't no joining up.

Interviewer: Did the American Army try to do anything to get ya'll out when you were a prisoner? Were there any rescue efforts?

Veteran: No, that's way deep in Germany. They couldn't get in there. What did they call it? We had something called Camp Lucky Strike—Recovered Allied Military Personnel Camp, or RAMP CAMP. They had about forty-something thousand there! But you talk about chaos and utter confusion with all those POWs—aw, man. But at least we got fed three times a day. Some old boy from Ft. Worth that was with me almost died with a ruptured appendix. His name was Byron Scott Garrett. One day he just disappeared, and about three months later, he showed up and had a hell of a scar. He said they just cut it opened and laid it back, and poured it full of iodine. That first meal we had at the RAMP CAMP, they had given us orders that we should only eat a couple of bites because we'd been POWs, and so Garrett went ahead of me. They had German POWs dishing out the food, so this young German put a little bit of mashed potatoes on Garrett's tray, and Garrett said, "More!" This German said, "Nein," and I thought, "Oh, hell." Sure enough, Garrett said a second time he wanted more and the German said, "Nein," and he reached over there and grabbed that guy by the head and put him face down in that big old container of mashed potatoes. We like to have never got old Garret to stop. I thought that German POW was going to die—boy! I saw Garrett again in San Antonio back in the summer of '45, and I thought I might run across him again sometime, but I never have. But he was a good person to stay away from. {Laughter}

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}