

Son of WWII veteran connects histories of Iowans in 97th bomb group, 414th squadron

Iowan Jim Bracewell joined the Army Air Corps in 1941, because his then-girlfriend Mildred said she would not be a farmer's wife. Because he had experience repairing machinery on the farm, he signed up to be a mechanic.

Bracewell was home from mechanics school training during a weekend in December when someone turned the radio on. It was then he learned about Pearl Harbor. The radio announcer said all military personnel were immediately to return to their posts.

In 1942 at a Florida training facility, Bracewell befriended fellow Iowan Ernst "Knobby" Knobloch, also a mechanic and former farmer. But because of shortages and Bracewell's size—despite his original preference, he was reassigned to duty as a B-17 tail gunner.

When he was bound overseas, Bracewell vowed to Mildred he would marry her when he returned.

On Aug. 17, 1942, Bracewell served as a gunner in the first daylight bombings of Rouen, France. Knobloch watched from the ground as the planes took off from England.

Knobloch's son, Lowell, said that in the many World War II anniversaries remembered the past several years, the first daylight bombings seem to have been forgotten.

Newspapers at the time reported that the raid on the French rail yards was "unusually successful," according to the U.S. Army headquarters.

"Without strategic daylight bombing—the accurate bombing of these rail yards. . . and fuel temples and munitions, we wouldn't have been able to win the war," Lowell said. He added that the English night bombings weren't accurate enough, which is why daylight bombings were necessary.

Bracewell returned safely. But after 11 missions, he was hospitalized with pneumonia. While there, his crew went on its 12th mission, took a direct hit and blew up in mid-air. There were no survivors, he said. From then on, he told his commanding officer, he would work as a mechanic, and would not go on another bombing mission.

After being reassigned to a ground crew, he rejoined Ernst and their group of mechanics.

They both served in North Africa. One of the places Bracewell was stationed was nicknamed "the mudhole deluxe." Bracewell said they dug foxholes in "hard-packed sand," and "were given one canteen of water a day, lived off Spam, dehydrated eggs and oxtail soup." He said they had to wash their clothes in 100-octane gasoline and let them dry before putting them on again.

"They lived like rats basically in tents, and they survived on water and rations, and... they fought in the desert and the sand, and still he worked all night sometimes getting the planes ready," Lowell Knobloch, Ernst's son, said.

Bracewell did return to the air, because it became standard for one mechanic to fly with each plane. After a mission from Maison Blanc, France, where his plane was "heavily damaged," they stopped for repairs in Foggia, Italy. The left strut broke upon landing in North Africa, Bracewell said.

"The wheel went back up in the wheel well and the wing caught on the corrugated runway, ripping it from the B-17," he said. He and the pilot ran through half-foot-high flames to escape the plane, but the copilot broke an ankle jumping out. Bracewell said he and the pilot ran back to collect him. In this wreck, Bracewell lost two teeth.

Bracewell was asked if he wanted to head home. His response? "Duh? Hell, yes!"

He left Europe in August 1944, headed to the States under sealed orders, he said. On a 24-day furlough, he and Mildred were married Sept. 13, 1944. He worked at Boeing on B-29s, "trying to get the bugs out of them." He was discharged in October 1946. But, in the reserves, Bracewell was called up again in 1948 to help with the Berlin Airlift. He stayed with the service, fixing planes the world-round, retiring in 1970.

After his discharge in 1945, Ernst returned to the Midwest, joined the Legion, married his sweetheart, Helen, and started a family. After a brief stint as a trucker, he also returned to farming, which he did with his wife until 1992. Among other medals, Ernst received a Presidential Unit Citation Badge, five Overseas Service bars and six battle stars for his service, Lowell said.

Unlike many WWII veterans, Ernst began sharing stories about his experiences in the war with Lowell when he was about 12 years old, Lowell said. Then, once he began attending bomb group reunions in the 1970s, Ernst shared more stories, Lowell said.

Lowell's uncle, Charles Von Der Lieth, was also a WWII veteran. Lowell said he served in the infantry in Europe, and had to fight the S.S. troops, and fought at the Battle of the Bulge. Like Ernst, Von Der Lieth opened up to Lowell, sharing stories on hunting and fishing trips.

Lowell learned, for instance, Von Der Lieth didn't remove his boots for over a month because other men who did would have swollen feet within minutes and be unable to put their shoes back on. Von Der Lieth told Lowell that at the Battle of the Bulge, men had to chisel holes into the ground, cover them with branches and take cover because "tree bursts"—splinters as shrapnel—could be lethal. He also recalled the complex attitudes and sometimes violent actions of the post-liberation French toward German sympathizers, and conversely the hostility between German civilians and troops. Lowell said Von Der Lieth was one of 17 from his outfit that made it back to America alive.

Stories like these are the ones Lowell realized he must preserve.

Growing up, Lowell had heard Ernst mention his buddy Bracewell, but he didn't know him—though the families exchanged Christmas cards. In 1992, Bracewell visited Ernst and his wife. Ernst passed away in 1995.

"About three years ago, I decided I better write everything down about dad before I forgot it," Lowell said.

He hoped to find Bracewell, which he did via Ancestry.com, and eventually made a five-day trip from South Dakota to visit him in California in 2014. There, he interviewed him, learning more about the daylight bombings and Bracewell's personal experience of the war and maybe his father's.

"Basically they were all scared to death wondering what was going to happen," Lowell said.

"He was just fortunate someone was looking out for him and he came back alive from it."

Now Lowell said he'd like to unite the "next generation" of the 97th bomb group from the Air Corps to identify the men in photos and swap stories. If interested, contact

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Submitted by:

American Legion