

Newspaper Article on Glenn Thomas Groover

Former POW recalls war

Veteran joined Air Force; spent war in German prison camp

By Cathy McNamara

On the outskirts of Long County, a former prisoner of World War II lives peacefully in his one-story home amongst nurtured rose bushes, pictures of grandchildren and great grandchildren and a little pekingnese dog named Gizmo.

A Ludowici native with ties to founding fathers of Liberty County, he fought and was nearly killed by the Germans in World War II. An engineer on a fighter plane which dropped several bombs across Germany, he was shot down on his seventh mission and held prisoner for 15 months when he was just 21 years old.

Filled with a least a dozen pieces of shrapnel you can still feel through his skin, 67-year old Thomas “Glenn” Groover is sitting in a recliner chair in his living room with his eyes so tightly shut tears roll out of the corners. Running his hand across a 50-year-old diary he kept as a POW, he is trying to remember every detail of his part in WWII. As he taps into the memories, tightly guarded in his mind, his eyes open and he quickly rushes through the three months he spent as a soldier and the 15 months he survived as a POW.

It’s been a long time since he has talked about the war—a long time since a friend or a grandchild asked to hear the proud stories once again. Groover says he has never told his story to the media—not because he wouldn’t tell it but because, amazingly enough, he was never asked.

Prison

An engineer on a B-17 bomber plane flying out of North Hampton, England, he was shot down by a German M-109 in January of 1944 after bombing a tank factory in Brunschweig on his seventh mission. He was imprisoned in a camp of 1700 for 15 months.

March

The more horrifying memories are the next to return. Just a young cotton-picker from Ludowici, he hazily remembers marching under German gunpoint with the excruciating pain of a frostbitten foot for miles, days and maybe weeks from his prison camp to a town in Austria. Spending the night in cow barns and chicken houses with little food to eat and no medical attention, the prisoners and the Germans were just ahead of the Russian troops, Groover said.

“I joined the Air Force because I wanted to get out of Ludowici and see the world,” he recalls. “But not through a barbed wire fence in Berlin.”

Boxcar

After the march to Austria, the prisoners were crammed like the Jewish who were persecuted during the war into small boxcars for 12 or more hours at a time and transported back to Germany.

Looking out the window past the comfort of his living room, Groover painfully recalls: “They put us, 50 men, in a 40 foot boxcar and shipped us to Musburg, Germany. They would open the door every so often and stick in a little piece of sausage, bread, or coffee. It was weeks long trip—they moved us at night. During the day, we’d be in the boxcar—no light could come into it. We wouldn’t see light for 24 hours at a time.”

Freedom

It came all at once—like a rush of water to a man who is dying of thirst, the prisoners—many dying, diseased, or ill—were given back their freedom. Groover, who was then 22, said in his entire life, he can’t recall a better feeling.

“Just after the march and the boxcar, we were liberated by General Patton and his troops. It was a mighty good feeling—quite a thrill. When we were in the camps, we always had this horrible feeling you would never make it out. Like someone had forgot about you. And the way people were mistreated at camps—you were always afraid you were next.”

“The day before we were liberated we were sleeping on the bed of a river and we could hear the shells all night long—they were fighting all around us,” he said. “That morning—Sunday morning—the battle continued.”

Then, General Patton sent the Germans word to surrender—the war was over.

“I remember Patton riding towards us standing up in a jeep. He was unprotected and firing was still going on all around. Some of them hadn’t got word yet. Patton and his troops ran over the gates to the prison with tanks. Patton got down off that jeep and shook as many hands as he could—shook my hand.”

Groover said the prisoners were flown to Belgium and then France where they received clothes, food, medical attention and hot meals. When he realized he was free, he said he had incredible cravings for “eggs, grits, cherry pie and fried chicken.” Weeks later, Groover was sent back to the United States—or more specifically Liberty County, where he has spent most of his life.

Groover was in the 8th Air Force and 305th Bomb group of the 365th squadron. He started basic training at the age of 18 and attended gunnery school in Florida. He was transferred to Utah, Texas, and then Washington D. C., for flight training. He ended up in Nebraska at what was designed to be a 90-day program, cut short at 45 days because of the war.

“They cut us short at 45 days because the Germans knocked out a bunch of airfields of ours so in November of 1943, I went overseas to fight the war,” he said.

An engineer on a B-17 flying with a bomb crew out of North Hampton, England, he and his first crew dropped bombs on chemical plants, tank factories and ball bearing factories. Groover, who considers himself “mighty” lucky to be alive, said first crew was killed in a crash landing after coming back from their seventh mission. Because of frostbite, Groover was unable to go on that mission—the engineer who replaced him, in addition to the crew he had been on six missions with, was killed in the crash.

“My crew crash landed coming back – all the officers were killed and the boy that took my place was killed. I was the only one of my original crew left because I was grounded with frostbite,” he said.

Groover and a new crew were shot down over Hamlin, Germany, in January of 1944 on his seventh mission.

“They told us it was going to be a milk run. Shoot, were we misinformed,” Groover said shaking his head.

Groover stopped and backed up a moment to explain his last raid, the crew and its mission. He said 60 of 900 American bombers on the raid were shot down over enemy territory that day. His crew of 10 was shot down by a German M-109 or a “fast fighter plan” after they released 12 bombs, weighing 500 lbs each on a tank factory in Brunswick. Groover said before they released the bombs and flew into the air space of six German M-109’s, they saw several other American bombers go down.

“We saw several planes go down around us. Some got hit before they released their bombs and just exploded. Nine hundred moved to one—us. Suddenly, we were the first plane over the target. It’s a terrible feeling...no where to go. We got knocked out of formation and were trying to make it to Switzerland when the 109’s jumped us,” he said. “We had to bail out.”

All but one member of a severely injured crew bailed out as their plane crashed into the ground in the small village of Hamlin where angry civilians were waiting with pitchforks, rakes and ropes—anything they could find to torture or hang their prisoners.

“They had us surrounded with pitchforks and rakes and everything imaginable...the civilian population. There was a man standing over me with a pitchfork one inch from my eyes. They were fixing to hang us. They were mad—they had a right to be, I reckon,” he said.

While a man stood at Groover’s shoulders with a pitchfork, a German boy searched his pockets for food, matches or anything to help him survive the destruction of

his homeland. What the young boy, who Groover estimates was about 6 or 7, found was a wartime luxury for kids—three packs of chewing gum.

“Before each mission, they’d give us a pack of gum to chew so your ears wouldn’t pop at high altitudes. I had three packs in my pocket – we had gone on three missions that week. The civilian kid found the gum and said plain as day, ‘Long time no see.’ It surprised me he could speak English. I said, ‘Boy where am I? Am I in Switzerland?’ He said, ‘No, you in Duetchsland.’”

Groover’s crew was actually saved from the civilians by the German military who sought refuge in nearby homes. Groover, who had 28 pieces of shrapnel lodged throughout his body, said his arm was immobile and he remembers bleeding heavily on a German woman’s living room couch before he was brought to a field hospital.

“I was wounded several times. Half my face was shot off...and my arm—I’d like to have lost my arm. I bled all over this lady’s couch. I’ll never forget what she said as the soldiers carried me out. She spoke that broken English and she said, ‘Some poor mother’s son.’” Groover sharply recalls. “Some poor mother’s son—she knew I belonged to someone and she felt for that someone.”

Groover said one crew member bailed out and landed on a Gustapo stations where he was severely beaten with clubs. The pilot and another crew member, who got Groover out of the plane safely apparently got in a fist fight seconds before the plane crashed head on into the ground.

“They said they got in a fight because the pilot got scared to bail out. They both went down. Nothing but a big hole,” he said. Because Groover survived the crash and the 28 shrapnel wounds and avoided illness despite poor living and health conditions while he was a P.O.W., he considers himself one of the lucky ones.

“They took us to this big field hospital. I remember the radio operator was lying on the operating table beside me—they were sawing off his leg.

‘He died right there calling my name over and over and he had a grip on my arm...holding my hand when he died. The night before he was shot down his wife telegraphed...she had a 10 lb. baby boy,’” he said.

Groover said he had nightmares almost every night for four years about that soldier and that day in the field hospital where they wrapped wounds without washing them in dirty toilet paper and men died from lack of medical attention. And sometimes, he still does.

“I dream about him calling my name over and over like that—it’s awful,” he said. But he tries to get past the nightmare and remember better times of his 15 months as a prisoner. Groover said he was lucky he was not mistreated or beaten as many prisoners were.

“I remember when the Germans brought these eight American prisoners into our camp. That put a scare into us. They were severely beaten. They had scabs where they’d been beat and their ribs were sticking out. You could count every one,” said Groover who added the American prisoners were mistaken for Jews and placed in a Jewish camp for months before they discovered they were Americans.

For Groover and the 1700 other American prisoners in his camp, just outside Berlin, there were better times. Times when talented prisoners sang and danced and performed for their German captors. Times when they wrote poems for women back home and even for their parents, who were allowed to send them care packages every so often. Times when they played bridge and softball and celebrated the arrival of a Red Cross food and supply package they had to divide up amongst themselves.

Like a game between the prisoners and their German captors, Groover fondly remembers months of protecting, standing guard over and hiding a little crystal radio. The radio transmitted the BBC News out of London, England, and kept them up to date on the progress of the war.

“It was well hidden. I kept guard on it one time, and I didn’t know where it was,” he said. “They hunted it for months and they never could find it. They would tear the place up looking for it. We’d come back and everything would be in a pile in the middle of the room.”

Groover said he never knew where the radio was hidden until the march to Austria. “I was marching side of a major and noticed he had a loaf of bread under his arm for miles and miles.

“That night they put us in the chicken house, he opened up the bread—it was hollowed out inside—and there was that little radio inside. He plugged it into a light switch and we got the BBC news all the way from London inside that little chicken house,” he chuckled.

After being captured and before he was imprisoned in the camp, he underwent interrogation. While many prisoners of war tell stories of brutal treatment, of interrogators beating them to the point of death for information, Groover speaks fondly of “his” interrogator.

“He never threatened me to get information –I told him my rank and serial number and that’s it,” Groover said.

Not only was the German-born interrogator’s manner civil, he was even young and friendly. Especially when he found out Groover was from Ludowici.

“I thought it was strange he spoke perfect English—perfect. And you wouldn’t believe it – I left my wallet in my pocket and he took it and opened it up, looked at my driver’s license and said, ‘Ludowici,’ just as plain as that. Now I knew if it wasn’t a

Southern boy, he sure enough couldn't pronounce Ludowici and it just amazed me that this German interrogator could pronounce Ludowici. And he started describing a bus station on the corner of 301 highway. I thought what are they teaching these guys?"

But the interrogator didn't learn Ludowici from a history book—he saw it with his own eyes. A native of Germany, he married an American and moved to Boston, Massachusetts. He told Groover he and his wife spent many a winter in Florida and had passed on bus through Ludowici, Georgia—among other cities—several times. When he and his wife returned to Germany to visit his parents in 1939, war broke out and he was forced to fight for his homeland.

"Can you believe that? He told me as quick as the war is over, he was going back to the states," Groover laughed and added, "Me too. I never saw him after that."

The end of the war was the end of a lot of things for Groover—the end of prison, the end of isolation and the end of fighting. And in the end—despite the recurring nightmares of dead and dying soldiers—he has won. After all, he's alive, well and very free living right here on the edge of Liberty.

Groover met movie star in service

Historically speaking, Groover's prison camp, located about 10 kilometers outside of Berlin in Germany, may worldwide newspaper headlines when several English prisoners dug a hole to their freedom in 1944.

Groover said he met Clark Gable, a first lieutenant in the Air Force, while stationed at Tandle Field in Florida for gunnery school before he fought in the war. He described Gable as "one of the best skeet shooters he'd ever seen" adding the famous actor was a photographer for the Air Force who took pictures of destruction after bombs were dropped.

"He was a very friendly guy. He'd always had time to stop and talk," Groover recalls. "They brought down a guy from Western Expert Shell Company to compete against Gable once—Gable just showed him up."

Groover, who lives with his wife Marjorie B. in Long County, has two daughters—Patricia G. Young, 43, and Barbara G. Wheeler, 39. Although he doesn't consider himself a war hero—just a lucky survivor—he was awarded several medals including the Air Medal, Purple Heart with an oakleaf cluster and a POW medal.

After the war, Groover was a member of the National Guard for 33 years.