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Robert Dunbar: A Humble Hero

Robert Dunbar is not your typical American. He has literally taken more “flack” than most Americans will ever take in their lifetime. I have gained the utmost respect for him and feel privileged to have had an opportunity to interview a true American Hero. He was a pilot in the 96th Bomb Group and flew more than 20 missions before being shot down. He spent nine months as a prisoner of war, captured by the Germans after his B-17 went down on his 21st mission, which happened to be over Germany. As his life story reveals, he is a genuine hero although he would not admit it.

When talking about his childhood, Robert Dunbar explained, “I was a child of the Great Depression. I remember things very, very tough in the family.” Mr. Dunbar also went on to say that “I can remember working through high school at 25-cent-an-hour various jobs, and I was the first one in my family to graduate from high school.” Mr. Dunbar graduated from high school in 1940, and, a year later, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps. When I asked why he enlisted, he said that he would rather enlist than get drafted. It was shortly after he enlisted that he was sent to Nashville, Tennessee, for classification.

As he was telling me about that time, his sense of humor started to come out. He told me how the Yankees at that base would stand around him in a circle and make him talk just to get a

good laugh. He would visit several more training bases in the United States before receiving a brand new B-17 and flying to Scotland to begin his time in combat.

When Robert Dunbar arrived in England, the British had already been flying bombing missions for nearly two years. However, that did not stop the Americans from jumping right in to the fray. He flew his first mission as a co-pilot in a bombing raid that would set up the ground forces for their invasion on D-Day; it was also his first experience of being shot at. He said, “The target that on the fourth of June was the Marshland Yards at Paris, France. See the purpose was to screw up transportation so the Germans couldn’t [get] all their resupplies. And that’s the day I was flying right underneath another B-17. He got a direct burst right in his right [side], between the two gunners, and I knew that they died instantly. And the nose went down, and the tail all went down. And that was my indoctrination to being shot at.” He told me several times throughout the interview how horrible it was to be shot at, and I still cannot imagine what that must feel like.

After his indoctrination to combat as a co-pilot, Mr. Dunbar was given his own crew and started flying missions as a pilot. His first missions were all along the French and Belgian coasts due to the fact that their fighter support could only take them so far on the gas they carried. His second mission was on D-Day when he dropped bombs on Normandy to prepare the way for the U.S. ground forces. Missions were often flown very close to each other. He explained, “From there on [after D-Day], we flew a mission every third, fourth, fifth day, weather permitting.” It was also during one of these early missions that—because the smoke signals that were used to mark the targets drifted over the American troops—Mr. Dunbar and his crew bombed short of the intended target and killed a squadron of American soldiers. He said, “You don’t hear about that in books and magazines and papers, not in any details anyway.” It was clear that this was an

emotional topic for him, but he was very composed in discussing it. After these early missions along the French coast, Mr. Dunbar and the 96th Bomb Group shifted their focus back to Germany, where their primary mission was to destroy the Luftwaffe.

To achieve this goal, they focused hard on bombing anything that related to German aircraft. He flew thirteen missions as a member of the bomb group on these missions before being promoted to group leader. He described his selection very humbly; he said, “I wasn’t selected because of my flying abilities; it was because of my navigator who took a meticulous flight log.” Mr. Dunbar flew 20 missions without being shot down, but on mission 21 he “had to die.”



I.G. Farbenindustrie AG
Source: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org

On September 13, 1944, Robert Dunbar took off from England as group commander for the 96th Bomb Group. Their target was the I.G. Farbenindustrie, the largest chemical plant in Germany before the war. It was crucial that the plant be destroyed because of the Ersatz fuel they were making. Everything was running as smoothly as it could when Mr. Dunbar noticed that a German anti-air battery had locked onto him. His group could avoid the blast, but Mr. Dunbar had to remain on target and drop his bombs. He did so, but in the process was shot down over southern Germany, less than forty miles from Allied territory.

He would spend the next nine months as a prisoner of war in three different prison camps: Nuremberg, Moosberg, and Stalag Luft III. The conditions of these camps were deplorable and very dangerous. While at Nuremberg, he was so close to an American and British

primary bombing target that they could feel the blasts from the exploding bombs in their camps. The scenes he witnessed were horrible, and it made me emotional even to hear them.

Through the hard times, Mr. Dunbar found some way to find humor in his situations. He wrote a poem while in Stalag Luft III titled "My Six-Slated Sack," which was about his six-slatted bed sack he had to sleep on. The boards of his bed, he explained, were removed in order to shore up the tunnels used in "The Great Escape," which after the war had a movie made regarding its events. He also told me a story of how he and other Americans "liberated" a chicken and a baggage cart from a train on a forced march to the Moosberg Prison Camp. Mr. Dunbar himself was liberated by American forces from Moosberg after nine months of being held prisoner. He was sent to France first, then on to America where he received a hero's welcome. He would go on to serve in the Korean and Vietnam Wars as well.

Robert Dunbar is an amazing man, and there is so much more I could write about him. What I learned from him is that when I think things are tough today, I have to realize it isn't that bad: I am not being shot at. Mr. Dunbar is a true hero in every sense of the word. I am extremely thankful to have met Robert Dunbar, and I hold him in the highest honor. Long live the memory of those who died fighting for our freedom, and thanks to those who fought and are still alive today.