

2nd Lt. Ellis Smith,
B-17 Co-Pilot

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These are the air combat memories of Ellis Smith, In His Own Words, as told to Jon Cermin September 8, 2001. Parts of this transcript have been edited for clarity and space:

Jon: Tell me about your encounter with jets.

Lt. Smith: Well, the ME-262 jets hit us one day and my tail gunner called up and said, "There's some planes on our tail that have no propellers." And I said, "You're kidding." He said, "No, I'm not kidding." And he said "They're back there." And I said, "Well, if they get too close you know what to do and about that time they opened up fire. They were too close. And he said, "The 50s are bouncing off their nose." They were armor-plated on the nose to protect the pilot and, then they flew up beside us and that's when we shot two down. And I think they're the first two shot down, jets ever shot down in World War II.

Jon: Who got credit for them?

Lt. Smith: Well actually no one because we didn't have time. We were flying missions and right after that we were shot down and we didn't really have time to get the credit through on those. But I think the ball turret gunner and the left waist gunner and the right waist gunner and the tail gunner, all of 'em should have gotten credit for those two jets.

Jon: Tell me about the mission where you got shot down.

Lt. Smith: Well, the weather was terrible that day and the G-box, or radar in England was out. They were working on it. We didn't have that for navigation. And we had a short mission, but when we were coming back, we had to hit the deck because we didn't have any radar and we were supposed to come out through France, which at that time was friendly. But we drifted over into some way or another near Rotterdam and got shot down.

It was flack and ground fire, same thing, ...at that time they had rocket bombs too and I think we got a little bit of everything because they had everything on the coast that, all kinds of stuff that they were firing at us.

At Rotterdam, we hit the alarm to bail out when we were hit. There was a fire in the cabin on the flight deck, an oxygen fire and it got really hot and fast. So we had it. We sent the engineer back and I don't know whether he made it or not. I saw him stooped over in the bomb bay, the bomb bay doors were open then and he disappeared. When I got to the bomb bay he had gone either in the back or he was hit. I don't know which.

We gave the alarm and we went out. I put my front pack chute on backwards because I was doing everything automatic and I just felt the hooks and put them on and then got in

the bomb bay and couldn't find the handle. Finally I spotted it and so I put my left hand on it and jumped and I gave a little pull and nothing happened, so I really pulled it and I said, "Oh, I broke it." And about that time my chute popped and I hit the ground. We were about 300 feet. Because the weather was so bad we had to go down on deck and they got several planes, seven...had 17's near Rotterdam that day and of course, if we had been on course we'd gone out through France, but some way or another because of the radar we couldn't navigate that close.

Jon: Did everybody get out?

Lt. Smith: No, seven were killed. The navigator and the pilot and myself got out. We were shot up pretty bad and the fire and so forth and, and 'course I didn't, like I couldn't follow the plane after I jumped out because I hit and my chute pulled me into the water, so I really don't know, you know, where the plane, whether it exploded or crashed or what after that.

Jon: Did you ever find out what happened to the rest of the crew?

Lt. Smith: Yeah, well they were all killed. We found that out later.

Jon: What happened once you hit the ground?

Lt. Smith: Well, my chute pulled me into the water. I spilled the chute and I heard shots right by me and two German marines were on the beach and they said, "Come on in." I said, "I'll be right there." So I went on in and they took us up. They had fortifications there right on the beach. There were bunkers and all kinds of guns and troops and we sat there for awhile and he finally saw one of those little pieces of leather here, and which was my .45, which I still had, but he saw it. He unzipped my jacket and there were hundreds of them around there and you couldn't do anything. So, he took my gun and he put his hand on my shoulder very militaristic and said in so many words, "Sorry you lost your gun," you know. But they took the bullets out, or the clip. He said to the other guy, "Aw..."

Jon: Did you feel like you were treated okay?

Lt. Smith: Yeah, they were German marines. They were military, you know, and they treated us all right.

Jon: What point of the war was this when you were shot down?

Lt. Smith: I was shot down April the 5th, 1945. I was a prisoner for 39 days. I was lucky. Some of the guys were in there for three or four years or more. I was in a transit camp in Holland. The Canadians had 'em cut off and they couldn't get us to Germany. And so they kept moving us north in Holland as the Canadians were moving north, pushing them back. They kept moving us north and we ended up on Djursland Island in the North Sea and we stayed in a hotel there and didn't have anything to eat, of course. When we were in Ellesmere near Amsterdam, south of Amsterdam, they had us in a

Catholic Monk's quarters near...(unintelligible name) by a Catholic church. Of us there were four Americans, there were 16 officers there and a hundred enlisted men and officers.

We wanted to escape and we drew four straws. There were two short and two long straws. I got a long straw, so I was going the second night. The two short straws went the first night and they got out through the church. They took out the stained glass windows in the church and escaped. Then the next day we had an underground message for nobody else to escape because the war was almost over and we had more to eat than they did.

So, we'd go down to get the bread, they sent two of us down to get the bread for the 16 of us and the bread was stacked against the wall and when the German guard, the guy was head of the dishing out the bread, turned his back – we had our flight jackets on – and we grabbed bread and stuck it in our flight jackets. So we had plenty, plenty of bread. But cabbage soup... one day they mowed the grass and cooked it up and brought it up and I thought it was gonna be split pea soup, and I love split pea soup. But it was grass. I didn't taste it at first. One of the other guys tasted it and spit it out and said, "This is grass." So there was a British general there and we complained to him and they apologized and said they'd give us the same thing the guards had, which was watery soup, potatoes, a little potatoes, and a little horse meat in it, and ersatz coffee and bread. That's about what we lived on.

Jon: Who liberated you?

Lt. Smith: The Canadians came up. They moved the 16 officers to Djursland Island from Ellesmere and the hundred enlisted men stayed there in Ellesmere. And when we were liberated Canadians were up in, near Ellesmere, near in Northern Ireland.

The Germans took us on an air-sea rescue boat they had over and the last night when before we were liberated they brought in 16 bottles of schnapps for us to celebrate.

The German Captain, he had a drink with us and, you know, the war was over and he shared a few tears and 'course we were happy 'cause we were going home. Until the next morning, I had one heck of a hangover. There were 16 of us and one Englishman wouldn't take a drink with 'em and he wouldn't drink, but the 16 bottles, quarts, were gone. So I didn't care the next morning whether I was liberated or not.

I had hob nail shoes they'd given me 'cause I'd lost my flying boots and they gave me a pair of new hob nail shoes and my bunk was on the third floor in the hotel and the bathroom was on the second floor. I had to go to the bathroom. When I got up to the room and I hit those stairs and I ended up on the second floor real quick. I fell all the way down the stairs.

But then the next morning they took us over to the mainland and there wasn't a soul in the town. It was a pretty good size town, and we found some grenades on a motorcycle and some of the guys threw 'em in this canal and celebrated. Then they gave us some bread to eat, white bread, which we hadn't had in a long time. It tasted like cake. They

wouldn't give us anything heavy because they said that we couldn't, you know, digest it. Then they took us down to Belgium.

Jon: When were you reunited with your group?

Lt. Smith: I didn't go back. I went to Camp Lucky Strike like a lot of them did and, and took a ship on back to New York.

Jon: Have you ever looked up any of those guys after the war?

Lt. Smith: I've gone back. I was the only one out of 16 who went back to Djursland and the people were getting ready to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the war ending and I wasn't there. I was there, but a little before that. But they were getting ready to celebrate and they had welcome banners, "welcome saviors" and all that strung across the streets and they really treated us royally. They took us around and the owners of the hotel took us around in their car and showed us the island and the fortifications and what the Germans had on the island. But they tore down the big radar screen. They had a tremendous radar screen they had that they picked us up on flying across the channel and then they'd call the fighters and tell them where we were coming. They bombed that down right away after the war.

Jon: What concerned you most when you were flying?

Lt. Smith: Well, when you were flying you were busy and, I myself didn't think about anything but that. I forced myself just to concentrate on flying and trying to do a good job. And I knew we were flying for a purpose and I wanted to help achieve that purpose. So I didn't mind it at all – at the time. I would now at my age, but I was young back then.

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