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Warrior for Freedom and Souls: Navigator, POW, Minister

Authors Note: Current generations of young Americans lack a collective memory of the conflicts of the twentieth century, and oral histories provide first-hand accounts of historical events that humanize the experiences of veterans and their families not available in textbooks. This article uses a bottom-up approach, telling the story of World War II veteran First Lieutenant William “Bill” Beasley with his words and perspective on: the varied hardships of the Great Depression; the individual experience of navigation training and war in the skies over Europe; the camaraderie and brotherhood that existed during training and while a prisoner of war; and, an attitude of acceptance and peace in regards to the hardships he faced. Each individual experience adds another voice to the collective conversation, broadening our understanding of the triumphs and tribulations from the “Greatest Generation.”

“I came to Bonham in 1972 and there was a guy living here at that time [who] was in the prisoner of war camp with me in Germany. I didn’t know him. We got to talking and he had been on that escort that day flying P-51s. So, we didn’t ask anybody, we just assumed and thanked one another that he was the guy that circled me ‘til I got on the ground.” During his oral history interviews, First Lieutenant William C. Beasley remembered the sense of brotherhood and camaraderie with other servicemen that formed during World War II, and the recollection of an

exchange with a brother-in-arms twenty-seven years after war's end sparked a twinkle in Bill's eye and a soft smile.¹ Although the term "oral history" evokes images of sound clips and transcriptions, the use of the collected material in the telling of stories and creation of public memory varies. Studs Terkel's *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two* remains the gold standard of an oral history narrative, but Terkel warned, "this is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic." The use of stories from ordinary people highlighted the fact that everyone remembers the events of war differently because everyone had a different experience, and it remains vital that scholars preserve as many "realities" of war as possible. Without the preservation of these varied experiences, scholars and citizens—whether or not they realize it—are faced with Terkel's dilemma where "the disrememberance of World War Two is as disturbingly profound as the forgettery of the Great Depression."² Unfortunately, the U.S. education system has produced multiple generations who know little about WWII and the men and women who sacrificed so much to maintain the U.S. way of life. Thus, historians must create a collective memory for their generation, and oral histories are the ideal methodology to achieve this goal. In the telling of the U.S. serviceman's and servicewoman's experience, historian Lee B. Kennett stressed that "the GI Army was, like the country it defended, a rich mixture of castes and classes containing the most diverse ethnic and cultural strains."³ No two GIs had the same story but that did not mean they did not have commonalities. The story that follows is that of First Lieutenant William Beasley, who as a former navigator and POW during WWII continues to add to the collective memory of the war, its effects, and soldiers' lives following the war, illustrating the constantly changing nature of public and/ or collective memory.

Regarding the reliability and validity of veterans' oral histories, in researching for *The Longest Day* Cornelius Ryan admitted at the Second National Colloquium on Oral History in 1968 that he "rejected at least ninety percent of the testimony I received in interviews [from Normandy invasion oral histories]...because I was unable to substantiate or confirm what the person said." Three decades later, however, historian Roger Horowitz argued that "historians could then use the fragments of the story obtained from many interviews [oral histories] to 'resurrect' what actually happened." Perhaps complicating the debate, oral historian Alice Hoffman and her husband, Howard Hoffman, a psychologist and World War II veteran, used Howard's military service—and his memories thereof—to define reliability "as the consistency with which an individual will tell the same story

about the same event on a number of different occasions.” The Hoffmans also concluded that validity “refers to the degree of conformity between the reports of the event and the event itself as reported by other primary source material, such as documents, diaries, letters, or other oral reports.” The Hoffmans, though, expanded their exploration into an examination of long-term memory; they noted that beyond merely humanizing historical narratives and recounting events of the past, oral histories allowed scholars to investigate how people remember events and how those memories change (if at all) over time.⁴

Like Horowitz and the Hoffmans, historian Alessandro Portelli declared that oral history is intrinsically different and leads to a different purpose; or, as historian Paul Thompson argued, “Oral history is a history built around people” and “through history ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives: wars, social transformations like the changing position of youth, technological changes like the end of steam power, or personal migration to a new community.” Thompson also observed that oral history “can give back to the people who made and experience history,” and authors Rocky R. Miracle and Katherine I. Miller did exactly that.⁵ Miracle wove personal letters between Sergeant D.C. Caughran Jr. and his family—into which Miracle later married—into the story of Caughran’s experience in WWII, providing a personal account of life in the military as well as life on the homefront. Using her father’s letters to his parents during WWII, Miller focused on her father’s transformation: “the experience of war—and especially of combat—by its nature has profound effects, both positive and negative.” She wrote, “war makes men of boys.”⁶

The oral history debate aside, historians continue to debate the effectiveness of air power versus infantry during WWII. As outlined in the Field Manual 100-20, Command and Employment of Air Power published in mid-1943, land operations succeeded only with advance air support, which ultimately created friction between the branches. And fighting conditions did nothing to quell the dissension. While the Air Corps took to the skies and fought war from a distance, Major General Wesley Hogan explained that “infantry combat is a brutal, personal thing.”⁷ Historian William L. O’Neill noted that the U.S. Army Air Corps perceived the implementation of strategic bombing (also known as area bombing)—as opposed to tactical bombing—to be a “high-tech and low-casualty” solution to create “a relatively bloodless victory.” In reality, strategic bombing—and the mere increase of bombing raids on Germany—resulted in two key consequences: an increase

in the number of Allied planes and crews lost, killed, or captured, as well as the decimation of German cities and the deaths of more and more German civilians.⁸

Allied Air Corps POWs had their own stories to tell. Denis Avey, a British WWII veteran and POW at a camp near Auschwitz, described his experience as brutal labor. Historian S.P. MacKenzie focused on World War II “captor policies and their results” to examine “the essential factors underlying POW treatment,” and he noted that scholars focused “their attention on the experiences and behavior of the prisoners themselves” and had largely ignored what factors played a role in POW stories.⁹ Regardless, camaraderie among POWs shone through in the documentation of the experiences, treatment, and details of camps in general. Jesse Cozean described the camaraderie among POWs stating, “when the former POWs got together, there was never any mention of rank. There is only one rank for a POW—they were all survivors, whether they had worn the stars of a general or the single chevron of a private.”¹⁰

William “Bill” Beasley—born December 28, 1922, in Georgetown, Mississippi—described a difficult childhood: “My real mother passed away when I was two years of age and I was reared by an uncle and aunt until dad remarried in 1935; I was twelve.” The family reunited and lived near his aunt and uncle, and Bill lived there until he completed high school. As in most Southern states, times were tough in Mississippi during the 1930s—with a \$126 per capita income of Mississippians in 1932—and neither President Franklin Roosevelt’s 50,000 jobs via the Civil Works Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps nor the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Farm Security Administration provided the Beasleys with relief because they grew “tomatoes, cabbage, string beans...majoring mostly on cabbage and tomatoes.”¹¹ Bill and his step-brother also had additional duties.

My primary assignment before I went to school ev’r morning was to milk two cows. I had a step brother and he’d milk two. And then comin’ back in the evening, we had to milk those same cows again. And usual chores around the house was, um, probably wood—we had no electricity—we had to get the wood in for cooking purposes and warming purposes. And usually in the work time of the year, we were in the field after about, oh, old enough to know what we were doin’, but it was, uh, it was not a laborious thing. It was really a joy.

Beasley “grew up knowin’ what it meant to get out in the field and work,” and also received “good religious teachings...I grew up in a home where I was protected and taught.” Originally too shy to attend and do well in school—“I would hide from the school bus driver”—Beasley ultimately enjoyed and excelled in school. “I always liked math from the time they started having any kind of arithmetic, math, business, whatever it is. And all the way through elementary school, then high school...I think the part I loved most of all was whatever had...to do with math... and history. I liked...I was a history student, too.” But, like many teenagers at the time, Beasley knew little about Adolf Hitler and the goings on in Europe...and he knew nothing about Japan. “I probably was a senior, and dad and I were down on the river fishing and there was some military airplanes stationed at Jackson [Mississippi] Air Base. We talked about that. ‘Their business is really picking up,’ you know, and I said...and dad was honest, he said, ‘Son, looks like you may have to go in service.’” The decision to enlist in the service was not easy for Beasley: “I really begun to wonder then which branch of service I would rather be in. I was, what seventeen, eighteen years old, and I first thought maybe the Navy. And I said, ‘No. (laughter) I don’t want the Navy.’ So, seeing those airplanes fly over a lot, I really became interested—if I had to go—that I would try to get in the Army Air Corps.”

Beasley completed high school in April 1941 and decided to work and attend college. He planned to work summers in the Beaumont/Port Arthur, Texas area—his aunt and uncle had moved there from Mississippi—and then he would return to Copiah Lincoln Junior College in Wesson, Mississippi. “I had made plans to go there and I had surgery, uh, just before I was going to—an appendectomy—and so I didn’t get to go. I said, ‘Well, I’ll go at mid-term.’ And then I became ill for ‘bout, uh...actually, I think it was a matter of a couple months and I just never did get back there. By that time, December 1941 had come along.”

I was living in Port Neches, Texas, and, of course, I think I’m right in remembering we were in church that Sunday morning and came home and I think by radio. I don’t think we...I know we didn’t have a television set, so by radio we learned about it. And it was just evident then by the next day we would...war would be declared. So, it just changed, kinda confirmed everything that I thought about. I was eight-, almost nineteen, um, yes almost nineteen.

Beasley did not run to the nearest recruitment station; instead, he kept working in Port Arthur and then went to work at a synthetic rubber factory in Port Neches.

After a short stint at the rubber plant, Beasley began looking toward the clouds. “There were two things that I was thinking about. One was the Air Force. And then I found out that maybe I could get into the Air...one of the cadet programs which was actually training pilot trainees or, you know, etc. If I didn’t try, I’d be drafted so I wanted there, of course, anyway.” Rather than wait for a draft notice and a probable infantry assignment, Beasley headed “to Houston and took the test, passed the cadet program test, and had to wait then for call to active duty... December the 12th, I think is 1942. I was...or December 18th...I passed the test and was sworn in. So, I waited about three months before I was called and they called me then, the first of April of ‘43.”

Bill arrived for basic training at Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas, which had been chosen for its railroad and highway hubs, flat land, warm and dry climate perfect for flying, and adequate water supply. Beasley explained “they were really speeding things up. I didn’t get any basic. Got clothing issue and didn’t even get any kind of, uh, manual of arms, anything like that.” Two weeks later, the U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC) shipped Bill to Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, where he entered the Air Corps’ College Detachment Training, a program for prospective pilots, navigators, and bombardiers that included courses in mathematics, history, and physics. After four months at Texas A&M, “we were sent to San Antonio for classification,” but after three weeks without activity Beasley made a paramount decision.

And I thought, “Well, you know, you haven’t made me...I haven’t been classified for pilot training, so I probably will...yes...you...bombardier’ll be fine.” And so the next morning they classified me for navigation training. Said that the battery of tests that I had...what I would...make a better navigator than I would a bombardier or a pilot. Said [in] fact, I would probably not get through pilot training because the ten hours I had at College Station were not very good hours.

The USAAC navigation program welcomed Bill Beasley with open arms. With too few viable candidates as navigators and bombardiers, the USAAC had little success in training complete flight crews; throughout 1940 and 1941, a measly 339 men qualified as navigators, far shy of the goal of 4,888 per year. Although the Japanese attack facilitated more concerted efforts, the USAAC did not reach a balance between the various parts of flight crew personnel until the end of 1943.¹² Beasley embraced his assignment as a navigator. “I was too tense on controls. Said,

you'd probably kill yourself or somebody else, and it was alright. I thought I... everybody wanted to be a pilot, I think, but if I couldn't be a pilot then okay. And I thoroughly enjoyed my navigation training."

Shipped first "to San Marcos, Texas, for advanced navigation training," and then to "pre-flight navigation training at Ellington Field in Houston," Beasley realized "why I liked math and why my battery of test probably showed that." He learned four different types of navigation—dead reckoning, celestial, radio, and pilotage—all of which required great skill to use, and Bill described his training:¹³

We were flying AT7s, which was a little twin engine plane. And, uh, we flew, we flew a lot of, uh, missions, not missions but they were navigation missions, that carried three navigation cadets on each plane. One did what they called pilotage navigation, one did, uh, radio, celestial, and one did dead reckoning navigation and you had to switch seats. Uh, I, I don't know. It took all, it really did. Uh, I mean, it was...I enjoyed the celestial part. I enjoyed all of it, I guess. In fact, I enjoyed the work of training to become a navigator.

Beasley received his commission as Second Lieutenant on March 18, 1944, and he shipped out to Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho, home to a B-24 combat crew training school. Bill's assignment to a bomber squad cemented an intense feeling of commitment and brotherhood. "The word crew is what we used, but the word team sounds better to me because I had a good pilot. He was one of the best pilots I knew...Kenneth Frazee from Weston, Connecticut. Sharp." Despite the events and plans for 1944—unveiling of the P-51 Mustang to protect bombers on their missions to Germany, as well as the build-up in preparation for the Allied cross-channel invasion of France—Beasley and his crew remained in Boise, Idaho, for intense training. Gunners practiced their marksmanship and Bill honed his navigation skills. The crew flew all hours of the day and night, and Bill recalled learning one great lesson during a night run.¹⁴ "The light wouldn't burn on my desk and I said, 'This is a perfect out.' And, uh, call him and I said, 'This...Ken, this navigation light won't burn down here.' And he sent me a flashlight. And I, we, I used a flashlight all the way to Sacramento and back. I said, 'Well, I guess I may have to use a flashlight somewhere, sometime.'"

From Boise, Idaho, the crew headed to Topeka, Kansas, to meet their new B-24 bomber that became both their best friend and hindrance in the weeks and months

that followed. The crew calibrated the plane's instruments and then received their orders.

You can't open the orders 'til you get in the air. So we were...we got in the air and the pilot opened the orders [and] let out a big, "Yahoo!" Said, "We're going to Europe rather than South Pacific." And we, we were delighted with that because we just felt like we didn't want to go to the South Pacific. It was needful but, again, Japan was over there and Germany was over there.

In May 1944, Beasley's crew set out on a northern route across the Atlantic Ocean via Bangor, Maine, and Goose Bay, Labrador, and the reality of war sunk in with each refueling stop. The absence of mortars and shrapnel, however, did not mean an absence of problems for the inexperienced crew.

On the way up from Bangor, Maine to Goose Bay, the engineer did a fuel check on the consumption of our gasoline and we were burning 286 gallons per hour. That means, it was gonna take ten hours to go to—from Goose Bay—to Turner Cross [Scotland]. We were gonna end up about 60 miles short, you know. If we had the same fuel consumption, we wouldn't make it. They told us and, uh, told the pilot to put our crew... to put it on what they call auto-lean fuel and fly up three hours and take your consumption. Said, if you're still burning 286 gallons an hour, you turn around and come back because you won't make it and if you go any further than that, you won't make it back. He [the pilot] put it on auto-lean the first three hours out and found that we were burning about...well, I don't know...we could make it anyway.

Nervous about completing the transoceanic trip, Beasley described how pilotage navigation remained futile navigating across the Atlantic Ocean. "You're never gonna see anything but water," so Bill relied on celestial navigation even as the crew left Labrador in a snow storm.

There's water beneath and clouds above. And I fly out about...we fly out about three hours and all in the world I've got is just a heading and you...I guess you say...instinct. Flying...I wasn't flying with the seat of my pants but I was navigating from the seat of my pants. Then there came a break

in the clouds and I identified the North Star which is...that's gonna give me my latitude. So, I took a celestial fix on the North Star and I said, "Well, I don't know where we are down the course but here I am...this...I know where we are here. And far as the latitude, I'm, I'm pretty well on course." And I plotted that in on my map and 'bout three hours later, I...'bout three hours later I came along—and the sun at that time was up—and I could put a fix on the sun and that'll give you your longitude. And I got a celestial fix on the sun and where those two cross, I had to trust that that's where we were, and I'm here today because that's where we were. (laughs)

Focused on fuel consumption but extremely confident of their location, the crew requested and received "permission to land in Ireland [Nutts Corner] instead of Scotland. So when we landed, we had sixty gallons of gasoline left, fifteen gallons for each engine. But what I'm going to say is that we got there ten minutes early and nobody was mad. If it'd been ten minutes late, they'd 'a been...they'd 'a thrown me outta the plane, I think."

After their eventful trans-Atlantic jaunt, the crew joined the 389th Bomb Group (BG)—the Sky Scorpions—of the 8th Air Force in Hethel, England. The "Sky Scorpions," nicknamed for their encounter with the deadly creatures during their time in North Africa, were organized in November 1942 as the 385th BG before being reassigned as the 389th in February 1943. The 389th BG flew missions in the Mediterranean, participated in the bombing of the Ploiești oil fields in Romania, and played a key role in the Allied invasion of Europe and the Allies' march to Germany. A few days after Beasley and his crew arrived in England, they awoke on June 6, 1944, to reports of Operation Overlord. "We knew that we were going to probably be assigned to our group pretty shortly thereafter, but I was not in combat on D-Day. I was, uh, we actually got assigned to our group probably a week later." Beasley and his crew saw their first combat action "when we...our ground forces kinda bogged down at Saint-Lô. We were giving ground support, um, even with four engine bombers, and we gave two missions...I flew two missions into Saint-Lô." Allied forces struggled to push through the "Normandy pocket," but they captured Cherbourg, France on June 24 and prepared for an intense assault on Saint-Lô, a transportation hub with hills flanking it. While Allied infantry battled the Germans and the hedgerows, the Air Corps blasted enemy defenses, including tank divisions, and Allied forces captured Saint-Lô on July 18 after 43 days of continuous combat.¹⁵

During the war, military planners designed various flying formations to protect aircraft from enemy fighters and improve the accuracy of bomb delivery on German targets. By May 1944, the Air Corps adopted a 36-plane box formation because the planes flew close enough together to defend against enemy fighters, yet the planes remained far enough apart to reduce damage caused by flak.¹⁶ After an early morning wake up call—three or four o'clock—Bill explained:

You'd get up, you'd dress, you'd go to breakfast, and then you'd go to briefing. And they would just point out to you where the dangers you might find, encounter, and then the chaplain would meet with us and—uh, because you don't mind, uh, when your life is on the line, you don't think about, uh, you don't hesitate and you're not embarrassed to talk about what would happen if, if you didn't get back.

Bill emphasized that the prayer “just kinda allay our fears. It was a kinda prayer that, regardless of what your relationship was, you would feel comfortable.” The prayer and camaraderie offered solace in the face of uncertainty, and then crews headed for the flight line to prepare for their missions. Beasley ultimately flew seventeen missions and chuckled nervously, “Every one of ‘em was scary.” Months of training and camaraderie did not prevent fear. “I’ll be real honest with you. I don’t remember flying a single mission that I was not afraid. I think I was, uh, I don’t mean I was afraid to the point of panic, but I was aware that, you know, you didn’t know what would happen. We didn’t know whether we would encounter enemy aircraft or anti-aircraft fire.” The threat of combat simultaneously created psychological stress yet motivated the men to stay alert and to maintain their plane, factors that ultimately allowed Beasley and his crew to advance to squadron leader.¹⁷

Our group was never attacked by enemy fighters and one of the reasons for it is the better formation you fly, they stay away from you. You have about fourteen, fifteen .50 caliber machine guns on each plane and you’ve got about six gunners on them and you’ve got fifteen planes to a squadron. You got 45 planes to a group and you group different levels and, if you fly good formation, they...there’s no place for the fighter to go. And my pilot was the best formation flier I have...and we were leading...we...within about 8 or 10 missions, we were what they call a lead crew. We were leading our squadron within our group and that meant he had to be the

group pilot. I had to be the group navigator; you didn't follow anybody else then. You do...did your own.

Despite the crew's good fortune in avoiding enemy fighters on the way to their targets, bomb runs always included anti-aircraft defenses. One such run reminded Beasley of the fortunes of war and the significance of the morning prayer.

[Beasley and the bombardier] were on a bomb run and I was looking out the window to try to help him find the target...make sure he was on the target and on the right bomb run. And he pulled my leg just and I turned around. "What do you want, Chuck?" (shrugs) "I don't know." And I turned back to the window to help him and the window was shot out...a hole that size (holds up hands with a circle about 6 inches across). And that seems...you know, a lotta people don't understand that, but as far as I'm concerned that was divine intervention.

Unfortunately, fate had other plans for the crew's co-pilot who was killed shortly after the crew became squadron leader, but again Beasley and his team learned how camaraderie and teamwork often transcended rank. Word on the co-pilot's replacement, a full-bird Colonel, did not inspire the crew that the "team" would remain close, but that is why they called it scuttlebutt.

One day, my bombardier came up to the flight line and he thought this was someone else and he hit 'im on the back and turned around and he saw these chicken—you know, the colonel things on the...on (points to his collar)...and he goes, "Oh, you know sir, I'm sorry." He [the Colonel] said, "Listen, you go on the flight line, rank's gone. We're all a team and we forget rank and I'm gonna be in that plane doin' my job. You gonna be in that plane doin' your job."

Allied bombers took aim at the German oil industry, German railroads and rail yards, airfields, bridges, oil refineries, and factories in or near German cities.¹⁸ Beasley's seventeenth mission on September 5, 1944, aboard the B-24 Sweet Pea, "was going to be just a regular mission. Started out kinda like every other thing else, you know," but then they encountered anti-aircraft fire. "And we'd seen anti-aircraft fire before...one time we'd been shot down, not shot at but we'd been shot up, and had to crash land in England. We had 155 holes in the plane." September

1944, however, was different. With engines No. 1 and 2 damaged and the rudder cables severed, Sweet Pea quickly lost altitude falling from 24,000 ft to 10,000 ft in a matter of minutes, leaving the rest of the bomber formation high above. Beasley's pilot said, "'We can't make it so we're gonna have to leave the plane.' And we did; we parachuted out...there were twelve of us on the plane. Anyway, when we parachuted out, we lost four of our people [including a rookie crew member]. Two parachutes didn't open and two were killed on the ground...shot." Beasley described his descent. "You count to ten—make sure you clear the plane—count to ten, pull your rip cord. And I counted to ten, pulled my rip cord, and nothing happened. And I looked over and didn't have the rip cord. I had a hold of my little harness and then, I didn't count to ten the next time." Beasley "landed in a tree and unbuckled my chute" and prepared to surrender. "We had a .45 pistol with us and I said, 'This is not worth anything to me. I'm not gonna fight anybody.' So I threw it away and went off and lie in a ditch. Thought, 'Well, I'll try to hide. I don't know what to do, but this looks like something I can do.' And about fifteen, twenty minutes, the German military were there." Nearly one-third of the 321 missions flown by the 389th BG resulted in losses of bombers and their crews, including 600 personnel reported missing or killed in action. On September 5, 1944, Beasley and his crew became a statistic.¹⁹

The Germans rounded up the remaining crewmen and headed toward Karlsruhe to board a transport to an interrogation center in Oberursel, Germany. Karlsruhe—a permanent military installation since the First World War and home to a German weapons and munitions factory and railway repair shops—became a permanent target for Allied bombers and endured 135 air raids throughout the duration of the war. Beasley and his buddies feared the Allied Air Force almost as much as their German captors because "the 8th Air Force...they came back to do the job we didn't do, uh, didn't fully done on the 5th of September. September 8, I guess, was the roughest day of my entire life because we were in the railroad yards and, when we came out, there were no railroad yards left. They were blown up. Bombs were still exploding and we had to walk through the city of Karlsruhe." Following the bombing, life took a strange turn for Beasley.²⁰

I owe a lot to the three German guards 'at had us, you know, because we got out in Karlsruhe. People had lost their buildings, their homes, family members under the rubble and here we are with Air Force uniforms on. What would we have done here in the United States? I think we would have taken those guys away from the soldiers. And, uh, that's what we

thought was going to happen because we saw nooses. (chuckle) We just...I just really realized...I thought I was gonna be strung up on a tree. And guns—we were beaten—but the guards discharged their rifles in the air to make sure...to let the people know, “We will use them. Our job is to protect these people.”

Although German people threw bricks and stones at the Allied captives, Beasley acknowledged that his treatment differed from most POWs. “You’ll probably meet and know some people that were mistreated, but the Luftwaffe took care of the... well, the German Air Force took care of the American Air Force prisoners and there was camaraderie.”

The walk through Karlsruhe tested Beasley. First, the German soldiers’ behavior prompted Bill to adjust his perception about Germans in general. He questioned how many Germans supported the war or the German government. Second, Beasley witnessed and contemplated his impact on German civilians: “Wondering how many of them were children? (voice cracked) Wondering how many of them were innocent victims? But I also had this thought: this could be in America and this is why we’re here. I saw people over there suffering but I said, ‘It could be in America and I’d much rather be over here.’” Despite the protective treatment, the POWs worried about their fate, and Beasley and his fellow POWs “prayed audibly. And that night when we got through all of it, locked up in a barn and, uh, I laughingly said to one of the guys—my engineer—I said, ‘I heard you pray today.’ And he said, ‘Sir, I heard you pray today, too.’ And, uh, I just teased him and I said, ‘Well, you didn’t go through your usual approach to prayer.’ (chuckles) And he said, ‘I didn’t have time’ (laughter).”

Beasley spent two weeks in solitary confinement in Oberursel prior to his interrogation, “in this little room, oh, coupla days and they brought all your food in—what food you had—and they would come and when you had to use the bathroom, you...they would bring a urinal for you unless you had to go and then they would go with you.” Isolation, however, did not prevent POWs from communicating.

I had a tap on the wall and it was...they identified themselves through code and I was able to know that it was really, probably another guy in the same boat I was in. So I verified who I was and then he—knowing that we were both people that had been captured—he said, “Did you by any means get down with your wings?” And I said, “Yes, I did.” He says,

“Great.” He said, “I’ll tell you how to open that window.” It was locked and so he told me how to open the window and I did and he said, “That way when you hear them coming to the door to check on you, you can quickly push the door...the window to, but otherwise you can look out, get fresh air.”

In addition to solitary confinement, the Germans also used food to attempt to break the POWs’ psyche. Originally, the Germans offered rotten cabbage soup and Beasley admitted being so hungry that the soup became appealing, but the menu eventually changed.

We were taken out and placed at a table very much like this where this, this bountiful meal—steak and the trimmings—were. As I told earlier, a map of Mississippi with my hometown circled on it and the name of my dad there by it. And they began to question me. “Now by the way, we know where your dad is; we know who he is.” I said, “Yeah.” And then they began to ask questions but, you know really, at the stage of the war we were in, September ‘44, it was already moving away from their favor. And, they were not as hard pressed with questions. They probably already knew everything they needed to know, but they did ask the questions and we were told the only thing that we were required to give to them was your name, rank, and serial number. Anything else was too much. They tried to involve you in lengthy conversations and so on. Anyway, after about an hour or two of interrogation, they closed out by saying, “Well, you...I’m sure we have one weapon left,” and that was they had just introduced the jet. “If this doesn’t work,” [they] said, “you may be home by Christmas.”

Christmas 1944 came and went and the Germans moved the POWs to a Red Cross Camp in Wetzlar, Germany. “We were given extra clothes and toothbrushes and things the Red Cross offered and furnished, and placed on a train in a, on a car, train car, with POW on the top. And given summer sausage, oh, ‘bout that long (holds hands up about 2 feet apart). Says, ‘This’ll last you ‘til you get to your prison camp.’ ‘Well, how we gonna get there?’ ‘Well, someone going that way will hook you on and take you part of the way.’” Passing train cars loaded with German bombs destined for Allied targets, Beasley endured a four-day train ride to Stalag Luft I, a camp for Allied officers opened in May 1940 outside of Barth, Germany. Stalag Luft I contained four compounds—three on the North side and one on the

West—with barracks designed for sixteen men housing up to twenty-four. Beasley noted that the camp “was just across the Baltic Sea from Sweden. There were about 10,000 of us in this camp and there were represented about 5,000 airplanes that had been lost.”²¹ Beasley received reasonable treatment while a resident of the camp, partially because of his rank but mostly because of the camp commander who had taught at the University of Chicago before the war. Bill speculated that German high commanders feared the man would identify with Americans and not fight wholeheartedly, so they assigned him to administer a camp full of Allied officers: “As our commandant, we had a communication because there was an identification there, I think, that made our stay a lot more tolerant.” Additionally, Beasley admitted “they [the Germans] at least had committed to abide by the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war, and I think the camaraderie that we had as an Air Force may have made ‘em easier on us. But, I mean even in the Gestapo, I think they still, to a measure, abided by how to treat a prisoner.”

Unlike many POW stories, Beasley acknowledged that “we didn’t receive any harsh treatment in the prison camp. We ate about what the German people had to eat and that wasn’t much.” Soldiers initially received Red Cross packages that contained on average “1 pound powdered milk (Klim), ½ pound sugar, 1 small tin butter, 1 tin liver paté, 1 tin peaches, 1 tin orange jelly, 1 tin dehydrated onions, 1 tin dehydrated corned beef hash, 1 packet breakfast cereal, 1 packet biscuits, 1 packet bouillon cubes, 2 packets chewing gum, 3 packets noodle soup, 2 packets egg powder, 1 bottle multivitamin pills, 1 tin opener,” cigarettes, and an occasional deck of cards.²² The precarious relationship between the Red Cross and German officials, however, left many prisoners neglected, and the increased Allied bombing in late 1944 and early 1945 further hindered Red Cross activities. Bill explained, “We were rationed down to a half a parcel a week, a fourth of a parcel, eighth of a parcel, and then no. So, in the process of eight months, nine months that I was there, I lost from 170 to 115 pounds.” The Red Cross parcels provided little sustenance, but they included a variety of items that prisoners adapted for practical use. Beasley said they “had people that were good with their hands and they took the powdered cans, powdered milk cans, etc. and, uh, find some way to cut ‘em in two and we made baking pans out of ‘em.” The men even fashioned a makeshift oven from a “little heater in the room and we just took a joint of the pipe out and put the oven in there.” Despite their attempts to maintain morale and nutrition, nothing could improve the German bread. “They brought bread in on wagons unwrapped, weighed about ten pounds a loaf, I think. (chuckle) Not really. It, if you toast it too long, it burned

like wood, probably was partly wood.” The most valuable items, though, were not edible: cartons of cigarettes.

Every Red Cross parcel had six packages of cigarettes. Well, as long as we were getting those cigarettes, they would accumulate. So, if a person didn’t smoke, we had this little store room and if people had too much salmon, too much something else, and he’d take it over and he’d sell it for cigarettes. Or, if you had cigarettes, you’d go over and buy. I didn’t smoke when I went down—or I meant, dad didn’t know that I smoked—I started smoking because when coming back off my missions they had to, a glass of bourbon to kinda relax you. I said, “No, I don’t do that.” And he said, “Well, then you need something to relax from so why don’t you try a cigarette.” Well, I did and got addicted and dad sent several parcels, but the only parcel I got was six packages of Lucky Strikes.

Despite their malnutrition, POWs made the best of each day with a variety of activities that resembled normal life. “We organized our own games to get some exercise and pass time. There was a small library in the camp; you could check out books. They had a few music instruments available and there’s always, out of 2500 people, people that could play them.” Beasley described how twenty men lived in a room built for eight—including triple bunk beds—and he remembered that lights out occurred at 8:00 p.m. This lack of light inspired the creation of oleomargarine “candles” that allowed the men to “play bridge ‘til one o’clock at night.” Bill had never “played bridge in my life but I sure did enjoy that pastime then.”

It wadn’t home by any means...We were just real helps to one another in tryin’ to get our spirits up, you know, and we’re gonna get outta here. At night when the lights were out, we’d open the wooden windows and look to the west and say, “Come on, Ike.” Look to the east and say, “Come on, Joe. It doesn’t matter which one of you gets here first.”

While they waited for liberation, Beasley and his men used Hogan’s Hero-style tactics to access external information about the war. They “bribed the guards to bring in radios—parts of radios—and then it...Mr. Bennett [a former news correspondent shot down and captured] put the radio back together, put it up in the attic, and we had our own BBC station.” The men also created a camp newspaper, the POW WOW, and distributed a copy to each compound to share the most

current news collected from the hidden radios.²³ “We’d meet together and they knew we were doin’ something and you could hear them and we’d start stomping our feet, you know. That, that was kinda like Hogan’s Heroes and we played tricks on ‘em, you know, so they couldn’t hear a thing. We’d just stomp like you...but we got, kept our own news. They gave us news but it was way behind the real battle line.” The light-hearted moments notwithstanding, war remained. Seeking cover indoors during an air raid seemed counterintuitive for soldiers because bombers targeted structures, and Beasley lamented how “we lost a couple, three men that either forgot we were in an air raid and they [the Germans] shot ‘em when they stepped outta the barracks.”

On April 29, 1945, German camp officials approached the POWs to announce their intention to vacate Stalag Luft I.²⁴ Beasley remembered the conversation clearly.

“We’re leaving. We’re leaving and we want you to man the towers. We want you to take over the administration of the camp, and we want you to be in charge because we don’t want to be captured by the Russians. We’re leaving, going toward the American lines.” And, they did and we sent out—what you call it—feelers to make sure that the Russians were coming and when they’d be there.

After nearly nine months behind enemy lines, Beasley recalled, “They [the Russians] came in like a Mongol hoard, vodka flowing everywhere. We still hadn’t done anything about the fence that’s still around, and they told our guys, our leaders—Colonel Spicer and Colonel Zemke”—to take down the fence surrounding the camp, which the POWs had left because the Germans had placed mines along the fence. Beasley admitted being skeptical regarding the alliance with the Russians: “Well, they didn’t mistreat us and I think they followed caution, precaution. They made sure we had to stay there until it was verified that we were who we said we were. I think we were fighting a common enemy, but I don’t think we were very much brothers.”

Beasley and his mates celebrated Mother’s Day 1945—May 13—with a little more fervor than normal, and he wanted nothing more than a hot meal and a one-way ticket home. The Army, however, had other plans. The military established Camp Lucky Strike along with two other camps near Le Havre, France, as emergency assembly areas because the planned areas could not accommodate the large number of troops returning home. Although giant tent cities, troops had access to medical

care, food, clothing, and other basic necessities. Bill “was sent to, brought to Camp Lucky Strike; there were 45,000 of us there. One reason for bringing us there: they didn’t want to send us home emaciated like we were and they fed us five meals a day to try to get some meat back on the bone. This was in May. I think I got back to the States June 14—landed in Boston—but I’m gonna say this about our country: they didn’t forget us.” But, he wished that the military had forgotten him once he arrived stateside. Despite his multiple bombing runs, lengthy stint in a German prison camp, and decorations—an Air Medal with 4 clusters and a Purple Heart—Beasley’s Advanced Service Rating Score, calculated based on a soldier’s months in the service, months overseas, medals, campaign stars, and each child under the age of eighteen (up to three), did not qualify him for discharge. He had earned less than the required eighty-five points.²⁵ The military granted Beasley rehabilitation leave with orders to head to the South Pacific immediately following his leave, but fate had other plans for Bill.

When I came back to the States Dad said, “Son, there’s a man that’s been trying to help me send some packages to you. You didn’t get them but nevertheless he knew what you probably could use and I sent them.” He said, “I think we...I’d just like for you personally to go out and talk to him and thank him for what he did.” I went out there and it’s where I met my wife [Sarah]...she was working for him. I, I’d never met her before and I’d like to share that I think that’s one of the things that maybe I went through all of that—nine months of POW experience—just to find my wife. If so, it’s been worth it ‘cause we’ve been married 62 years now.

Within days of meeting Sarah, Japan surrendered to the Allies.

The U.S. Army discharged First Lieutenant William C. Beasley in November 1945, and he and Sarah—who he affectionately referred to as Sadie—married one month later and set off for Port Neches, Texas, where Bill had a job waiting for him at a rubber company. “She loaded up—never been away from her home—put her stuff in my car and here we come back [to Port Neches]. I didn’t tell her that I felt that the Lord might be calling me into the ministry. And then that became another obstacle because what do you tell a young bride? You bought ‘em a house, your car, furniture, you’re working and you up and tell her. What are you going to do?” Unhappy and unsatisfied with his job, Beasley struggled to find the right words to inform his new bride, but he underestimated Sadie’s patience and support. “When I finally came to the point of telling my wife that there might be...it must be some

reason that I couldn't find the joy, the peace. And she said, 'Listen, I've known that all the time.' I said, 'How'd you know?' She said, 'Your minister told me but he said it has...you...he won't need to do it because you know it. He needs to because it's his decision.'"

The Beasleys enrolled at East Texas Baptist College in 1947 thanks to the GI Bill; Bill graduated in 1950 with a degree in history and Sadie graduated in 1951. Almost immediately, Bill accepted a position as student pastor in Newsome, Texas, a small East Texas community between Winnsboro and Pittsburg. Before long, the Beasleys headed for Bryan, Texas.

I don't know why I didn't have sense enough to see this all along, but what is Bryan, Texas? Bryan-College Station. At that time, it was Texas A&M and it was largely what? Corps...military...Bryan Air Force Base was there. Allen Military Academy was there. Junior colleges, nothing but military. And I see all of that, the Lord, I think, was preparing me again for—I'd been in the military—and He was just getting some more training in there. And we went in...we stayed there 8 years. Went to Mart, Texas, and from there back to Pittsburg...First Baptist Church in Pittsburg.

Beasley and his family eventually made their way to Bonham, Texas, where Beasley spent sixteen years at a local church, never paying much attention to the local Veterans Administration (VA) hospital there although Bill admitted he "knew it was out here." One day the hospital chaplain called Bill.

[He] asked me, says, "You gonna sit down all the time?" I said, "Most of the time." He said, "No really, what do you want to do?" And I said, "Well, I don't plan to sit down all the time." He said, "Well, how does six hours a week interest you?" Said, "I need someone to visit in the hospital two hours, three days a week; six hours a week." And I said, "My wife's teaching school, that sounds like a good outlet, good work."

What started as a small, weekly commitment quickly "mushroomed from that to starting a class to work with alcoholics. I'd never done that in my life." Not surprisingly given the circumstances of war, "we had a number of older veterans that just couldn't stay on the wagon and they couldn't keep them if they didn't try to stay sober...We went to, grew up to about 40 or 50 in the class and, uh, by that

time I was up half-time.” When the chaplain retired, Beasley asked for the job and he “spent the next seven years as full-time chaplain.”

Beasley relied on his own military service to relate to men from a variety of military backgrounds: “My heart always went out to veterans in my membership. I felt like I had a tie with ‘em. I could speak their language.” A unique brand of camaraderie accompanied a U.S. military uniform and military service; the branch of service made no difference.

So many of them are here and have very little contact with family or outside world and not all of them have the right spirit. Some of ‘em are bitter, but I kept my door open down there...down the hall...and if a guy wanted to come by and talk, I had all the time in the world. I had one guy that came by every morning and he said, “I’ve come for my morning prayer. If I don’t get it, I won’t make today.”

Like most men who confront combat, Beasley’s experiences followed him decades beyond his military service. He lamented that he had not tried to stay in contact with his crew members. “I can’t find them on the internet; I don’t know how to go about, you know, finding them.” Bill found one man—one of his gunners—near Muskogee, Oklahoma: “My wife and I went up to Lake Arrowhead, just this side of Muskogee, and drove on and found that six weeks ‘fore I got there, he had died. And I thought, ‘Well, I don’t think I wanna do that. I won’t look any further.’” Despite the lack of reunions, Beasley insisted that the Allies “won the war because of teamwork...I really believe that.”

In an exchange with an infantryman decades after the war, Beasley said, “Listen man, I wanna thank you for sweating out all the water and stuff, you know.” The infantryman said, “Listen, when I used to look up in the air and say there they go. [I] said, ‘Drop ‘em, brother.’”

Historian Thomas Saylor observed that the oral history interview process can mean as much to the veterans as the information does to students, scholars, and society: “One...[veteran]...said he feels a responsibility to tell his story because society seems to be forgetting what his generation contributed.” Saylor also noted how other veterans labeled the experience as “cathartic” or “therapeutic.” Veterans—and perhaps their family members—are the best people to provide information that creates or enhances public memory; as historian John Bodnar wrote, “They [veterans] bore the brunt of the tragic aspects of the conflicts and

witnessed much of the suffering and cruelty.”²⁶ While the preservation of these experiences is important, oral history recordings are of little use if they only collect dust on archives shelves or get lost on hard-drives. History professors stress the importance of history as the story of human beings, but excluding these people in favor of historiographical debates and/or meaningless facts leaves history without humanity. Telling these stories engages students and they in turn can participate in the preservation of history...history with which they have little connection.

Specialist James Ball, a 1964 graduate of East Texas State College and Vietnam veteran, provided an interesting perspective of the East Texas War and Memory Project's efforts to preserve and tell veterans' stories. "I like your approach that seeks capture & frames people's lives during wartime: real characters on an enormous, unpredictable & always changing stage. Duty in a combat theater, or in a seemingly passive support role, is anything but glamorous." Upon receiving a copy of the PRIDE, the alumni magazine of Texas A&M University-Commerce, depicting a unique angle of Major General Chris Adams, a fellow alum, Ball penned the following:²⁷

I had just retrieved the noonday mail
and slowly ambled up the trail,
sorting things, when much to my surprise

A color photo of a man,
soon revealed himself, as planned:
Partial visage: chin and nose, no eyes.

I thought, "That's strange. So where's the rest?
Somehow, I must have flunked the test"
Answer? It lay just one page inside.

The editors had carefully chopped
two sparkling orbs and youthful mop.
The reason why opened my eyes wide.

Their thought behind the crafty plot
brought to light was time has wrought.
Sometimes we don't remember when we should.

The unfilled face was every man.
General, private, those who can
and will submit to pledge themselves for good.

When wrong erupts to tempt our fate,
faces rise and muster to wait
to answer duty's call and show the way.

Faces have always been on trial
with courage, strength; most with a smile,
like the one the postman brought today.²⁸

For a country seemingly involved in continuous conflict around the world, current generations lack an understanding and appreciation of the Second World War and its effects on veterans and their families. In fact, we argue that current generations lack a collective memory of the past due to the desensitization and disinterest fostered by generic history textbooks. These stories are not meant to celebrate war, but to ensure that veterans'—men and women—sacrifices and the history of an entire generation of people are not forgotten. They were ordinary people who did extraordinary things, and their stories must be preserved and told.

Notes

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