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*(James Randolph Knaub, May 2, 1919-Feb. 17, 1997,  
Richmond, VA)*  
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## **MY WWII EXPERIENCES**

Interview with James R. Knaub  
by Catherine A. Knaub

(pages 10-19)

### **What was briefing and debriefing?**

Briefing – you went in the morning that you were going to fly and they showed you on the map where you were going and gave you the information you needed. (How long – how many fighters you would have for escort – what was expected – and a general instruction for the mission)



James R. Knaub and Catherine A. Knaub

### **Did they give you any kind of indoctrination into the kinds of planes to expect?**

We had already had to study aircraft identification, because you could easily shoot down your own fighters. In fact, some were shot down by B17's accidentally. When you got into combat and planes were zipping around you so fast, you didn't have time to see them sometimes. So, some were shot down accidentally. You had to try to identify the fighters you were shooting at.

### **You remember the first mission?**

I remember the first mission, but it didn't seem to be much. It didn't bother us, because we didn't have any trouble on that one. It was July 13, 1944, and we went to Munich. I just don't remember much about it. But, I remember the second one.

### **That was where?**

That was outside of Munich. It was an airfield called Lechfeld. That was the day that Smitty flew with another crew – the tail gunner. They took him off to fly with another crew and they put their tail gunner with us. It seems they were checking out the other crew one by one. Somebody on the other crew was stealing morphine out of the first aide kit. That day, they were checking out the tail gunner. We do not know whether the pilot was the one on it or not, because they were all killed that day. For some reason, the pilot went down under the plane he was flying within formation and came up under it and cut his airplane right in half. The one that

Smitty (Gordon Smith) was in was just cut completely in half, and all 9 of them on board were killed.

**Now, what date was that?**

That was on July 19, 1944. That was our second mission. (lost 2 planes)

**Okay. Let's do the third.**

Well, we went to Leipzig. Right over there with Mershburg and Halle all in a little group there – but, it was right outside the city of Leipzig. It was the biggest synthetic oil refinery that the Germans had and they always protected that with everything in the world they could put up. We got it that day, if I'm not mistaken. I think that is the day we lost 8 planes out of the 36 – the fighters. That was July 20, 1944.

**The fourth mission was on what date?**

The fourth mission we went to St. Lo (France) on July 24, 1944. I remember that one because we were supposed to open up a hole in the German lines for the troops to go through that were held up near St Lo France. During the night, the Germans had attacked and pushed the Americans back, and the American counter-attacked and pushed the Germans back beyond the original lines. The Americans took up the original German positions and we didn't know it. The next morning we dropped bombs right on the American lines. It killed a General. I think he was named McNair. They sent out a recall after we had already dropped our bombs. A lot of them turned around and went back to England without dropping their bombs after they found out what was going on. We went back the next day on July 25, 1944, (fifth mission) and opened up a hole through the German lines that the American went right on through France.

**What was that July 25th? And what was the number of those missions?**

That was July 24th and 25th. The fourth and fifth missions. Then, the next one (sixth mission) was on July 31, 1944. We went to Munich again. I don't remember much about that one. Munich was a favorite target at that time. There were a lot of military targets or something there that we were bombing. (lost 1 plane) That was the sixth mission and the second time we had been to Munich. Then on the seventh mission we went to Peenemunde (on Baltic Sea). I remember that one. It was up in the Baltic.

**Is that the one you told me they hated to go to?**

Well, I don't know. We didn't know much about it, but that is where they developed rockets. The buzz bombs, the V1 and the V2 rockets were developed at Peenemunde. It was a peninsula up in the Baltic. I can remember the day we went over. You could see. It was clear that day. You could see 3 great big buildings on the

peninsula. Coming over the water, we did not have any anti-aircraft. We got near the target because all of the guns were over the land. They put up quite a barrage of anti-aircraft at the target, but they didn't hit us. We could see the bombs when they hit. The whole bombs just strung right across the middle building. It looked like it just tore that middle building up. We never went back there again. Some others did have to go and bomb later on. That was the experimental station for rockets.

The next one (eighth mission) was to a place in France. It was Send, but I don't remember what happened on that. We evidently didn't have much trouble. You had flack every time you went though. It didn't make any difference where you went, you had some flack – light flack to heavy flack.

### **What was the next one?**

Let's see, that was eight, the next one was nine. On nine (August 8, 1944, lost one plane) we went southeast of Bretteville. I think that was Kahn, France. That's where the Germans had us held up again – the troops on the ground. Just like at S. Lo went in there with antipersonnel bombs and opened up a hole for the troops to advance, because they had been bottle-necked there. The tenth was Buc (August 12th) and eleventh was Lemanoir (August 13th). The twelfth was Met/Frechaty (August 14). Some of those were airfields. Some were troop concentrations. Some of them were rail stations too, railroad transportation connections. They were all in France. Then on the thirteenth mission we went to Halle, which was the same as Leipzig–Merhburg. It was all right there in that one part of S.E. Germany, I think it was. It was right far over into Germany. That's the day that we got shot up.

### **You mean extra bad?**

Yeah, Barker was hit. Dick was hit. We lost two superchargers and dropped out of formation. That was the day then that the Me163 that we had heard about, but had never seen, attacked us from the rear.

### **Tell me about Barker getting hit?**

Well, Barker was hit through the leg with a 13 or 15 millimeter cannon shell that didn't explode. It was a second contact explosive, and it put a hole through his leg about the size of a silver dollar. It knocked him off his seat back there. He climbed back up on his seat and shot down the FW190 as it was attacking from the rear. But then that was while we were still in formation. As we dropped out of formation, we dragged him up into the waist; so I could cut his pants leg open and bandage him up–gave him shots of morphine–and Loomis went back in the tail to take the tail position. That is when he saw this Me163 and called him out back there. Mullins said to let him know if he starts in. When he did, Loomis said, "Here he comes." All I could do was hang on because Mullins and the co-pilot, not Nassimbeni (Nassimbeni was taking a test to get his 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant's bar, he had been a flight officer.) So, Forest Drewery was flying in his place that day. Those two bounced the ship all over the

sky and he missed us. Then he pulled off to the side. He was sitting out there figuring where he was going to make his next pass, I reckon. I was shooting at him and Kenny was shooting at him from the ball turret, and Chaney, I guess, was up in the top turret in Dick's place. Dick had been wounded when Barker was wounded.

### **Tell me about Dick's head.**

Well, that shell had exploded when it hit Dick's top turret. If the one in Barker's leg had exploded, it would have blown his leg off. But, that one didn't explode. The one that exploded hit Dick's turret and the shell fragments went all in his head beside his scalp. It was just superficial wounds, but he bled like a stuck pig. I cannot help but remember the first time I saw him when we were out of Germany headed home. He came straggling up through the bomb bay with his head bandaged up and blood was everywhere. He was the saddest looking sight I have ever seen. But anyway, he was all right. As I said, Chaney was in the top turret shooting at the Me163 when all of a sudden these two P51's came down in a dive on him. He nosed over and went down. I couldn't see him, but Kenny said he watched him. They (P51s) shot him down – It was the first time one of them was shot down in history. That was August 16, 1944, the thirteenth mission. We also that day, the ninety-first, lost 6 airplanes to those fighters. The one that hit us did not knock us down, but 6 were shot down that day.

Then, the fourteenth mission, which was August 24, 1944. I don't remember a thing about it. Lo Kolleda Hi and Lo Goslar, that name doesn't mean a thing to me. The fifteenth mission was August 25th, Neubrandenburg, that was some type of military target. We were hitting ball bearing plants, airplane factories and everything that was putting out any type of military things. The sixteenth, we went to Heligoland. I vaguely remember that. I have forgotten what the target was. It seems to me like it was on the water—that it was submarine pens down there. The seventeenth mission was August 30, 1944, to Kiel. Then the eighteenth mission on September 5, 1944, we went to Ludwigshafen. That doesn't ring any bells either, but we went back to Ludwigshafen on September 9th. It was the nineteenth mission. The twentieth mission, September 11, 1944, was Lutzkendorf. Then on September 13th we went back to the same target for the twenty-first mission, Lutzkendorf. The twenty-second mission was September 25th. We went to Frankfurt. I think Frankfurt had a factory of – I just don't remember because there were so many different factories we were hitting over there. The same thing on the 26th of September was Osnabruck—the twenty-third mission. That was my last mission with Mullins. It was after that mission the communications officer said he wanted me to fly on lead plane. Well, I hollered and so did Mullins. The communications officer said he did not care what we thought that was where I was going. So that's where I went. It worked out real good, because if you flew 7 or more mission on lead plane you got credit for 5 more. I flew 7 more and finished at 30 instead of having to fly 35. So that part worked out all right. The twenty-fourth mission I didn't fly until October 7th. The first one on lead was to Freiberg. The next one was Koln (twenty-fifth) on October 14th. The only thing I can remember is that we were alternating crews in a way. I flew every other mission on lead plane supposedly with a boy named John Cardiff. He was

flying one mission and then I'd fly the next, then he'd fly the next and so on. But, they put me in the hospital after the 25th mission with high blood pressure to see if they could find out what was wrong. Cardiff flew every mission then while I was gone. They didn't find anything wrong except nerves they said. I came back about November 3rd or 4<sup>th</sup> to the base. My name was not on the list because I hadn't been on the base, and Cardiff was still up. He had flown six or seven missions straight while I was gone. The next day they did not fly and so he didn't go and neither did I. Well, that day, they still didn't change the list. They should have pulled him off and put me on there, but they left the same list of names up there and he went out on the 6th of November. He got a direct hit under the radio operator's chair and killed him. I always felt bad about that.

Anyway, I didn't fly again until November 9th. The twenty-sixth mission went to group support south of Metz. Evidently the troops were having some trouble there and we went to support them. The twenty-seventh mission we went to Altenbeken on the 26th of November. That day, Barker had come back and his leg was still from being shot. He couldn't get down in the tail; so they put him up in the nose of the ship flying as a toggleleer. He would drop the bombs when the lead plane dropped bombs. He was flying with a Lt. Stevens on his last mission that day. The fighters attacked and their plane we thought had gone down, but it turned out that they were knocked out of formation. It didn't go down until it got over into Holland. They bailed out over Holland. From what we learned since, he got out of the plane some of them were captured as prisoners and some of them got into the hands of the underground. He did get in the hands of the underground, but I haven't been able to find out what happened to him.

Evidently, he got back after the war. I reckon he got out all right. There on that November 26th, the day he was shot down, we lost 3 planes that day, 6 on August 16th, and 8 on July 20th. Every time fighters hit us that was about as light as you got out of it. We didn't get fighters every time. If we had, we would never have gotten out of there. We would have never made it.

The twenty-eighth mission was the next day, November 27th – Offenburg. I don't remember anything about that. But, the twenty-ninth mission, we went to Kassel. I was flying with Captain Boggs and Major Taylor on lead plane. That day, I was flying with Captain Boggs and he was rough on airplanes. That day on the way in to the target, we lost one engine with oil lines breaking or something. We lost oil pressure and we had to feather the prop. With the three engines we kept up and wen on with the group across the target. But, as we left the target and started out of there, we lost the second engine on the other side. We didn't have but the two engines left and we were bucking a 60 mile an hour head wind. We dropped out of formation and we were moving so slowly – I think it was something like 50 or 60 miles an hour ground speed hitting that head wind – that the navigator figured we were going to make it about half way across the English Channle and North Sea. And that was a far as we were going to get on the gasoline. So, we got to Brussels. It was a few weeks after the Germans had been run out and spent the night. The next day, we came on back in

another plane, because we had to leave that one there to be repaired. Got back to the base the next day. That was December 4, 1944. It was my next to my last mission. They thought we had gone down, because the last anybody saw of us, we had dropped out of formation. With two engines out and two props were feathered, they thought we didn't make it – but we did. Got back and Dick had all of my stuff out of my locker. He had picked up my things to keep the quartermaster from grabbing them, because they grabbed everybody's personal stuff. You don't know how much of it was ever sent home. He had mine and I got it all back.

Then, my last mission, the thirtieth mission, was December the 12th. We went to Merseburg. When I went in that day to briefing and I saw Merseburg, I said, "Lord, I'll never make it." I will never forget the communications officer said, "I'll bet you a half crown that you have a milk run." I said, "Well, I'll take that bet and I hope I lose." And, we got back that night, I looked him up and gave him a half crown. So, that was the last one.

**Maybe you ought to explain "lead plane." I know that it is leading the planes, but how many are in the groups?**

There is a lead plane for each squadron. You had 3 squadrons in the group. Each squadron flew 12 planes. We had a high squadron, a low squadron, and lead squadron. Sometimes our squadron would lead the other two. Sometimes one of those would lead the whole thing, but even so, you had a lead plane for each twelve planes (one squadron). Sometimes, the squadron would get separated from the rest of the group for various reasons. I was the lead plane on the 323rd squadron. You had 322nd, 324th and 401st squadrons of which, one squadron was down every time you flew. Every time you went out on a mission, you took 3 squadrons. The next time, you took 3 squadrons, one of those stayed down and the one that was down before flew. That was the way you got a day off sometimes, because they'd fly every day that the weather was permissible.

**What time did you go out in the morning?**

That was varied according to where we were going. They would get us up anywhere from 2 o'clock to 5 o'clock in the morning. You just have to dress and go to breakfast and go to briefing. From the time you got up until the time you got your plane off the ground, was several hours. Then, they had to form up over England to get into formation before you ever left. We took off – depending on the time of year – in the winter time you had darkness until 8 or 9 o'clock; so you took off in the dark, and you came back it was about dark in the afternoon. Of course, in the summer time you had a lot of daylight. You didn't have but about 3 or 4 hours of darkness in the longest days of the year.

**I'm trying to remember what you said about Reese coming back on two engines.**

Well, that was the one I missed. That was November 2nd. Back in 1944 while I was in the hospital with that high blood pressure. The whole group was attacked by – I don't know how many fighters – but out of the 36 planes in the three squadrons that day, 13 were shot down and 3 that got back were junked. So, it was the worse losses we had while I was over there. Mullins was one of them that got back. They started to junk his plane, but they didn't. They were shot up so badly that they lost 2 engines on one side. They had 2 engines left on one side. Not many people would have brought it out of there with 2 on one side, but he did. They were so late getting back, that they were given up for lost because the last any of them had seen of them, the 2 engines were lost on one side. They did not have any idea they were coming out of there. They got back about an hour or so after the others did. They had thrown out everything that would come loose in the plane. They were trying to drop the ball turret when they got over England, because they were losing altitude. He couldn't open his hands for about 3 days from fighting that wheel holding it. With the co-pilot – because it took all the two of them could do to hold that thing to keep it from going into a spin, with all the power on one side.

**Do you remember which mission your oxygen got disconnected?**

No, I don't. But, it was on one of the lead plane missions though because we were bombing by radar that day. They had what you call a mickey operator that operated radar equipment. The radar dome stuck under the plane where the ball turret usually was fairly new. The radar mickey operator – they called him –was in the radio room on the other side of the room from me with a curtain up there with all of his things. It was the first time I ever saw anything like that. He showed it to me as we came in over the North Sea. He had his maps laying out there and he showed me his screen. You could see it just like his map where the water and the land ended and the rivers and things down there. That's the way they would go in with radar if it was cloudy or what not, they could still see the layout of the land underneath. They would bomb by that radar. But, on that one day, I started getting dizzy. He was over there behind his curtain. All of a sudden I realized what was wrong. I grabbed my oxygen mask and all I had was the hose. It had come disconnected. I tried to plug it back in, but by then, I was so near gone I couldn't plug it in. I was like a drunk. I remember he was over there; so I tried to reach him and I got up to get him and I fell into the curtain. He looked to see what was wrong. I fell out. He saw that I didn't have nay oxygen hose; so he plugged me in and I came back out of it. If he hadn't have been there though, I don't know what would have happened.

**Okay, tell me about your medals? Which ones you got ... I know you got the Distinguished Flying Cross.**

Oh, well, you got an air medal for each 5 missions. So, I got an air medal at 5, another one at 10, another one at 15, and another one at 20, but that was the maximum. Because originally, they only few 25 missions. They gave you a Distinguished Flying Cross if you completed your tour. So, then at the end they got a Distinguished Flying Cross. Well, when they raised the missions to 30 and then to 35, they didn't give any

more air medals for the 25 and 30. They just waited until the end and gave you a distinguished flying cross. So, I got the Distinguished Flying Cross after I finished my 30th mission. There is the air medal with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and then there is the European Theater Campaign medal. I think I also got the Good Conduct medal.

### **Thank goodness you didn't get the Purple Heart!**

No, I didn't get the Purple Heart. Dick and Barker did on the plane.

On December 12, they told me I had a choice. I could come home. They guaranteed at least 90 days in this country. And then, anything – I could go to the Pacific or wherever needed. Or, I could stay on the base, and they would find something for me to do. I told them I would rather come to this country. I had to sit and wait then to get orders to come home and whatever they had to do to get me here. It took about a month or so. Shortly after that, in December, the Battle of the Bulge broke out. They didn't do much of anything while that was going on because nobody knew what was going to happen. The Germans were making one last desperate effort to break through.

Anyway, finally I got orders to report to Southampton. I don't remember what day. It must have been somewhere around ... it was in the first week of January. I had to catch the train from over there, and when I left the base all by myself, Dick had a 7 day furlough. He had 5 missions left to fly. He had to fly 35, and he had lost some time after he had been wounded. Anyway, he had a 7 day furlough and he caught the train with me as far as London. I left him in London because I had to change stations. Just like here, you would come into the Broad Street Station and transfer to the Main Street; I came into King's Cross, and I had to go out in the Houston Station or vice versa. It was two different stations. Anyway, I have forgotten how I got from one station to the other. I must have caught a bus or cab or whatever. I got to the other station; and the train was near ready to go; and I was trying to get to the other side of the tracks. To get there, you had to go down in a tunnel under the tracks to get to the other side. You didn't cross over the tracks because they had a whole bunch of tracks. I had everything I owned with me. I was struggling and this tommy came by. He said, "Come on Yank," and he grabbed one of the bags and took off. Well, I had to go after him with the rest of them. We went down under the tunnel, got over the other side, and I caught the train. If it hadn't been for him, I think I would have missed it. I went to Southampton. I don't remember how long I was there – 4 or 5 days at least.

Finally, they put me in a charge of a group that was coming home too, because I was a tech sergeant and most of those guys were staff sergeants. So, they gave me a list of the papers for these guys, and there must have been about 10 of them besides my own – with instructions of some lieutenant who would be on board ship that I had to locate and turn these guys over to him with their records. I was responsible for them until then. We boarded ship; I found the guy; and I wasn't worried about those

boys not going with me because they were going home too. They weren't going to skip out anywhere. I turned the papers over to this officer, and they were all present and accounted for. We got on the General J.R. Brooke. We sailed from Southampton on either January 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>. I can't remember which date that was. But, I know it took us 10 or 11 days to cross, and we got to New York on January 21<sup>st</sup>. We came across in a convoy. There were something like 3 troop transports, some tankers, some transport ships or cargo ships, and 3 destroyers – one up front, one in the back, and one off to the side. They circled and zigzagged around us in all kinds of ways, and every so many minutes, the whole convoy would change course. So, the submarines couldn't figure where we were going to be at a given time to lay and wait for us. We didn't have any trouble except for rough seas in the North Atlantic. They tell me that when that ship went over, it hit a terrific North Atlantic storm with a full load of troops that it carried into Le Harve, France. It nearly capsized and that was one sick bunch on that ship, but they got in all right.

What we had, was 500 German prisoners up in the bough of the ship, and there were about 1500 casualties – American casualties on there. There were somewhere around 400 or 500 able bodied- like me – coming back to this country. There were air corp – air force returnees – and others for different reasons. Prisons were up in the bough of the ship, and, of course, the casualties were bedridden – most of them. So, the able bodied had to work our way across. Everybody had certain duties to perform that were able bodied. We worked every other day. I had to work K.P. every other day coming back, for those 10 days or so. It was al right 'cause it wasn't bad except right at first, when we were up in the North Atlantic. They headed south to get into the Gulf Stream. Once we got into that, it wasn't that rough. But, up in that North Atlantic, I will never forget. There was one passageway – it went across the ship not up and down but across it. You could stand in that passageway and look out one side and you were looking at the sky. You look the other way and you were looking down into the ocean. That is the way that ship was rocking and rolling. Working K.P., when they would bring those German prisoners into the mess hall to eat, they were so sick from bouncing up in the bough of that ship that you could see them turn green. They would come in and smell food and half of them would take off back out the door.

But anyway, we did not have any trouble and came on into New York – that was January 21<sup>st</sup>. We were processed there and given orders. I was given a 10-day delay en route to go to Miami, Florida, for reassignment. I left New York on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and came on home – the night of our 6<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. After the 10 days or just before the 10 days were up, Kitty and I went on to Miami for reassignment. We stayed in a hotel. They had a mess hall or it was a restaurant that had been taken over by the army for our mess hall. We were billeted in hotel rooms. I thought it was real nice. Mama didn't think too much of it, but I thought it was nice. Mama thought the hotel was nice – she just didn't like the food. We bought an old Buick. I got my reassignment for Fort Worth, Texas. We left there and headed for Fort Worth in that old Buick. Every time you put in 5 gallons of gas, you added a quart of oil. If you put in 10 gallons, you put in 2 quarts. I don't know how we made it, but we did.

Including the brakes going out on us just as we got to New Orleans. The master cylinder had a seal break in it. The brake peddle just went to the floor. But we, got on into New Orleans and went to a shop. They overhauled the master cylinder, while we just walked around some of New Orleans down there near the shop waiting for it.

We got to Forth Worth all right though. After that, I sold that down there and we bought a '36 Plymouth. It wasn't a whole lot better, but I think it did improve on that Buick. Down there, they asked me if I wanted to fly and get my ... I could get 3 months back flying pay. So, I told them, "Yes," I'd like to get in my ... had to get 12 hours - 4 hours for each of the 3 months that I hadn't been flying at that time. So, the first day, I went to fly, I caught ... that base had B-24s on it, and it was a transition base training B-24 pilots. It turned out that the instructor was a second lieutenant who had been through training there, and they had made him an instructor. He didn't know as much as I did about an airplane, I don't believe, and I couldn't fly one. But, he had 2 students there with him. One would be in the other seat from him, and one stood behind him. What they would do is one student would fly for a while; then they would switch and the other student would fly for a while. Well, that day we went up, and they were teaching them to fly formations. Well, they couldn't hold the plane in formation close to the other ones. And it was in and out, in and out. He would go charging in and almost crash into the next guy before he would ever pull it out of there. I was still nervous anyway, and it was about to drive me crazy. I didn't like that. The next day, I went out and I caught the same instructor and the same 2 students. The day before was bad enough, but that day, we started down the runway, and just as that plane left the ground, it switched sideways. It hit the ground "squashup." Well, all I could do was grab hold. In a B-24, the radio operator was right there behind the pilot and co-pilot. I was at a table right there behind them with that other student standing right there by me behind them too. So, the plane straightened out and got going. I didn't say anything then, but when we got back, I asked the ... or, I did too, I asked the student then standing there. I said, "What happened?" He pointed at the throttles. Of the 4 throttles, the first one on the right was all the way back. The instructor had reached up and pulled one of those throttles and cut the engine. So, when we got back I asked the instructor, "Would you mind telling me why you pulled the throttle on number 4 when we took off?" He said, "I just wanted to simulate what would happen if the engine conked out on takeoff so he would know what to do." I said, "Lieutenant, I don't know whether you have ever had an engine conk out on your or not, but if you fill the plane with gas and a bomb load and start down the runway and one of the engines conks on you, you can pull everything that's in the cabin, I don't care what you do, it is going nowhere but down." "You can pull throttle all you want to, I've had it." I went to operations and told them to give me a ground job.

So, I didn't fly anymore until this boy, Woody, we were living with, was a B-24 pilot. He had come back from Italy. He asked me, "You want to fly ..." I had then about 2 months made up. "You want to fly the rest of your time to get your 3 months' pay with me one day?" I said, "Sure, I'll go with you." From that day until, oh Lord, it

must have been way up in the '50s or early '60s I never flew again. Philip Morris sent me to Louisville on one of their passenger planes that they were flying back before I ever flew – because of that jerk down in Forth Worth. Anyway, we were there when Germany quit. So, they gave orders to transfer to Greenville, Mississippi.

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