

This week's veteran is Verl Fisher.

Verl Fisher graduated from Assumption High School in 1938. He was the son of Forest and Maude Fisher. His father ran a barber shop in Assumption, and his mother was a seamstress. Verl graduated from flying school on January 4, 1943. He married Frances(Cookie) Burgener on April 12, 1943, in St. Charles, MO.

Verl joined the 305th Bomb Group, 366th Squadron, Eighth Air Force which flew the B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft. The plane was a high-flying, long-range bomber that was able to withstand extensive battle damage. It had a crew of ten. The pilot and copilot were the only members of the crew that did not man guns. The 305th was stationing in Chelveston, England, from 1942 until 1945.

On his first mission, Verl, as a copilot, flew on the Schweinfurt-Regensburg mission on August 17, 1943. Ball bearing plants in Schweinfurt were supplying the German war machine. A total of sixty B-17s were destroyed on the combined raid which was a huge loss. Daytime bombing and flying out of the range of their fighter escorts were the main reasons for the heavy losses. Although General Curtis Lemay had helped develop the compact box formation to help protect the bombers against fighter attacks, it was difficult for them to stay together.

It's not hard to imagine how surprised the airmen were when they were told that they were going on another raid on Schweinfurt on October 14, 1943. They learned that the Germans had more fighter planes available than on the August 17, 1943, attack. By this time Verl was pilot of his own crew. On the day of the raid, due to fog, visibility was zero which made it hard for them to find each other once they were airborne. The 305th sent eighteen planes on the mission. Because of many bad decisions made by the officer leading the 305th that day, thirteen of the fifteen B-17s that made the raid were destroyed. Three had turned back early: one got lost; one had engine problems; and one had lost its oxygen. When asked by his commanding officer upon returning where the rest of the ships were, the Lieutenant replied, "Sir, there are no more ships. We are the only ones left!"

Verl had to fly 25 missions to go home. He was on his 24th when his plane was shot down on the way to Schweinfurt. Upon landing in an open field, Verl hurt his back and both knees. German soldiers captured him with bayonets. After three days, he was put on a train to Franklin, Germany. After another three days, he arrived at Stalag Luft III Prison Camp in Germany where he stayed for nineteen months.

Prison life was pretty dismal. They had no heat. Water was only available in the cook shack and the latrine. Each morning, after standing outside for roll call while their barracks were checked, they were given a slice of bread and coffee for breakfast. Their days were spent walking, playing cards, reading, or lying in their bunks thinking about home and family. Verl spent the 1943 and 1944 Christmases as a P. O. W.

Starting at 3 AM on January 28, 1945, the Germans moved the prisoners from Stalag Luft III. They marched for three days in snow and rain before boarding a train for the prison at Moosberg, Germany, arriving on February 7, 1945. The Moosberg prison was overcrowded. The latrine started overflowing in three weeks. Conditions were horrible. Finally, on April 29, 1945, they were rescued by General Patton using German tanks. On June 2, 1945, Verl met his wife in Chicago. His ordeal was finally over.

According to an article published in the Chicago Tribune on February 13, 1965, by David Halvorsen, "Hitler was angered by the American bombing of Dresden, which he had declared an open city. In retaliation, he ordered Lt. Gen. Gottlob Berger to kill the American air prisoners of war. Berger ignored this order and in the confusion of the final weeks, Hitler never checked to see if his instructions had been carried out."

Verl was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak-leaf Clusters.

Distinguished Flying Cross: For extraordinary achievement, while serving as Pilot of a B-17 airplane on more than twenty bombardment missions over enemy occupied Europe. On returning from the mission dispatched 23 September 1943, and while circling the airfield preparatory to landing, one airplane of the squadron went out of control and into a vertical dive. Though Flight Officer Fisher skillfully avoided the onrushing plane, the left horizontal stabilizer of his aircraft was torn-off by falling parts from the stricken plane. In spite of this serious damage sustained at an exceptionally low altitude, Flight Officer Fisher accomplished a safe landing. The courage and skillful airmanship displayed by Flight Officer Fisher on this and all his missions reflect highest credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

Air Medal with Three Oak-Leaf Clusters: For exceptionally meritorious achievement, while participating in twenty separate bomber combat missions over enemy occupied Continental Europe. The courage, coolness and skill displayed by this officer upon these occasions reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

Verl and Cookie have three children: Randy Fisher, Peggy(Fisher) Hudson, Mary Jane(Fisher) Gabrielsen, and four grandchildren. Verl owned Fisher's Jewelry Store and was a partner in Bugg and Fisher Insurance in Assumption.

Thank you, 1st Lieutenant Verl Fisher for what you did for us.

I want to thank Mary Jane Gabrielsen for information and research about her dad. I also used information from the books Wrong Place! Wrong Time! by George C. Kuhl and A Wartime Log by Peggy Hudson. These books are in the Assumption Library.

Jim Bugg