

JESS BRITTON AND FIFINELLA

Written by Jim Brown

German fighter pilots, it has been conceded for some time, knew far more English than their U.S. Army Air Corps counterparts knew German during World War II.

It doesn't take a whole lot of imagination to envision Nazi fliers, peering to get a closer look at the names of the B-17 bombers, as they approached, machine guns blazing. There was the Wicked Witch, Pistol Packin' Mama, Duke of Paducah, Superstitious Aloysius, Rhapsody in Red and the Texas Bronco.

On the Fifinella., bearing a Walt Disney Cartoon of a "babe riding a bomb," was Tyler's Jess Britton, a ball turret gunner, watching from the belly of the fortress for unwanted attackers roaring up from below.

"I had a ringside seat like you wouldn't believe," recollected Britton, 86, who retired several years ago as the owner of his own flooring business.

Somehow, Jess Willard Briton's parents, West Texas farmers, knew when he weighed in on September 29, 1915, that the 13 pound baby would be a fighter, and named him after Jess Willard, who became boxing's heavyweight champion of the world only a few months before.

After he graduated from high school in Weslaco in 1934, Willard spent six years working for the Texas Department of Agriculture. In 1940, while inspecting vegetables in Brownsboro, his eyes fell on his future wife, Louise Tidwell.

They were married that year and took up housekeeping in Weslaco. But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor a year later, Britton, thinking fighting meant being a pilot, dropped his young bride off in Brownsboro and set off for flight school in June 1942. But about 50 hours into his training, he became ill with appendicitis and had to drop out of flight school. His superiors liked his savvy, and decided to train Britton; not only for a ringside seat, but all the action he could handle as well.

After being trained to fire .50 caliber machine guns, how to repair aircraft turrets, bomb racks and bomb releases, Britton received his orders to join the 91st Bomb Group in Bassingbourn England.

It was May 1944, and the Americans were gearing up for something of gargantuan proportions. Britton said two weeks before E-Day, June 6, 1944, he and the crew of the Fifinella flew a "diversionary mission" in an attempt to make the Nazis think the invasion would take place at Calais instead of crossing the 50 mile channel to Normandy.

"If Hitler had listened to some of his top-notch generals, and he had some, they would have seen that we were not going to attack at the narrowest part of the channel," Britton said.

S/Sgt. Jess Britton participated in the D-Day invasion, scattering German fighter planes while the bombardier lowered the boom on a strategic airfield about 30 miles from Normandy.

Britton said typically the 91st would fly missions with as many as 150 bombers, concentrating thousands of pounds of bombs, or salvos, on one target.

"We weren't there to win friends and influence people," said Britton. "We wanted to destroy their ability to make war."

On August 13, 1944m the flight of the Fifinella took a slightly unexpected turn. As the plane released its final bomb on a railroad bridge near St. Cyr, France, that day, anti-aircraft fire from the ground filled the sky and the Fifinella was caught in a crossfire. A shell struck the oxygen tank in the bomber's nose. As it began to lose elevation, Lt. Smith suffering from burns, ordered the crew to bail out. As Smith lunged through an opening, he hit his head on the side of the plane, and died.

Britton jumped and landed safely in the middle of a wheat field by the Seine River. About 200 miles behind enemy lines, he did as he was trained by British fighter pilots and stuffed his parachute into a wheat stock. Then he found a larger wheat shock, large enough for him to wedge his small frame into and stayed put for five days.

He came out only at night, to draw enough water out of the Seine River to drink and to fill a small water can he used to mix up part of his wheat-home into daily bread. "I like wheat to this day," Britton said, smiling. "You know cows, pigs and chickens get the good part of the grain."

Early on the morning of the fifth day, Britton decided it was time to venture out. With a small pouch of maps from his escape kit, he began walking along the Seine River. He said he had walked about a mile when he happened upon a French man and his son, on bicycles.

Despite the language barrier, Britton understood when they pointed to his Army flight suit, shaking their heads, saying "Verboten," which translated means "forbidden." He also understood when they pointed to his watch, indicating they would be back for him at 5 P.M.

True to their word, they returned, with another bicycle and a change of clothes. "Believe me, I had some thoughts before I traded my uniform for their French clothes," Britton said. "We were told it was the death penalty if the Germans caught you out of uniform.

The men put Britton in the middle and the three made their way into and through St. Cyr. Britton said as he pedaled his bike past German soldiers, each of which had a scary-looking gun, in his hands or on his shoulder, he was confident he was not only dressed for the part, but looked French as well.

"I was scruffy-looking and needed a shave and a haircut," he said. "It's the way the French looked after nearly five years of occupation."

The men took him to their home and hid him in the attic. From a shuttered window, he could peer out and see huge Tiger tanks rumbling down the street. Within hours, he was joined in the attic by two of his crewmembers, co-pilot 2nd Lt. Joe Vukovich and tail gunner S/Sgt. Leonard Rogers and he understood that the father-son team was part of a larger underground organization.

They stayed in the attic for five weeks. Though he enjoyed a little more variety in his diet than he did in; his wheat shock cabin, Britton said he dined mostly on vegetables and lost 21 pounds.

On August 26, on the home front in Brownsboro, Louise Britton received the following telegram: "The Secretary of War has asked me to express his deep regret that your husband, Jess W. Britton, has been reported missing in action since 13 August, over France."

While Britton and his buddies were there, Marcelles Seveant, the bicycling son, was married. Britton said Seveant's bride made her wedding dress out of Rogers's parachute.

In September, the city was liberated by the French and Canadians and Britton, Rogers and Vukovich came down out of the attic. The war was over for Britton, who made his way by plane back to England, by ship to the states and by train to Brownsboro.

Figuring he could get word of his safety to his wife quicker than the military, he walked up on her front porch and gave her the most wonderful shock of her life. "It was traumatic," Britton said.

Staff Sgt. Jess Britton finished out the war as a gunnery instructor at a base in San Antonio and was preparing to return to action, against Japan, when the war ended. Britton was decorated with a Silver Battle Star and an Air Medal with two bronze clusters.

The Brittons settled in Tyler Texas in 1946, building a home on Airport Road.

In 1994, on the 50th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, Rogers, who made a career out of the Air Force and was able to stay in touch with the Seavants, contacted Britton to let him know that the three men who hid out in the attic had been invited to celebrate the Seavants 50th wedding anniversary.

Britton, who has photographs of himself posing with the newlywed couple in August 1944, posed once again with them and re-traced the steps he took over the French countryside.

At 86, he's still a fighter, making the most of his opportunities to pass along the qualities of the "Greatest Generation" to those who will follow.

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