



Remembering WWII Pilot Ozzie Drahos

An Oral History of Drahos' Service in the US Air Force During WWII

Thought Leadership Report

Veterans Day is time to remember and give thanks to those who have fought to defend our country. The following is an oral history of Ozzie Drahos' service in the US Air Force as a pilot during World War II. As he said it best, "That's the way it goes."

Pearl Harbor

I think it was Pearl Harbor that influenced Miriam (my wife) and I to enlist. We were upset at what had happened. The number of people that were killed and the idea that they were attacked in such a way really got to us. There were many people that felt the same as we did. The Japanese did a very bad thing when they attacked us at Pearl Harbor.

Miriam was inspired more by her father because he had been a sergeant in the Marines during World War I. He talked a lot about having been a Marine and he wanted to have someone in the family to be in the service. This influenced Miriam to join. I wanted to join to get into pilot training.

I wanted to fly. That's all I wanted to do. I thought maybe I would get into the fighter planes. I joined the Air Force and Miriam joined the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). Although we both enlisted at the same time, she was called to the service before me.

They picked 120 of the WAAC's to go to Algiers, Africa. Miriam was one of the ten girls assigned to be on Ike's (President Eisenhower), who was a three star general at that time, staff. During Miriam's training they found out that she knew shorthand. That ended up being the reason she had a job with such secrecy involved. The top brass thought that was very practical because of the secrecy of the work they were doing and that's why it just fit right in. She was also an excellent typist. She was very, very good at typing and putting notes together so that was also one of the reasons that she got into the top secret work and did so much at Eisenhower's Headquarters in Africa.

Miriam was actually a part of the group of WAACs who worked with the British leaders of the war. She spent more time working with the British than the Americans. (Lt. Col. "Jimmy") Doolittle was at the headquarters too at that time. He became famous for being the first one to bomb Japan with the B-25s. He led a special operation where



Ozzie and Miriam Drahos on their wedding day in November of 1943

they took off from carriers in the B-25s and dropped bombs on Japan.

During her time in Africa, Miriam's group actually went through a bombing and a strafing of their quarters by German fighter planes. I don't think anyone was killed in that raid but it was still naturally quite upsetting to the girls.

One day, one of the Generals told her to go and take dictation from Churchill (Winston) because his girls didn't make their flight to Africa. She went in to the office and Churchill had a bunch of notes. When she walked into his office and the first thing Churchill said was "Can you sew?" She looked at him and said "Well, I can sew a little." Then he said, "Would you mind sewing a button on my pants, they hold up my suspenders." So she sewed the button on.

Miriam had been over in Africa for about five months when I finally was called to duty and was to report to my training in December of 1942. I reported and we had to take a series of tests, which determined if we had the capabilities or the coordinative abilities to become pilots, navigators, or bombardiers. We took a bunch of tests and they would classify you.

Miriam wanted to get married so she came home. She didn't enlist in the regular army. She came home just as I was completing my flying



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training. We got married on the military base by a Catholic Chaplain about the time I got my commission in the Air Force. As a matter of fact I had to fly the morning we got married. It was kind of interesting because I had to take a flight test the morning of the wedding. This was my last test before I'd get my wings. I had to pass that or I wouldn't get commissioned.

Well I flew the test, I came down and went right over to the church, and we got married. For the flight test we were required to wear a parachute and I got grease on my tie. My wife mentioned it many times to people that when we got married I wore a greasy tie. The tie became greasy because I hooked up the buckle of the parachute and the buckle had a lot of grease on it and it got on my tie. That was in November, 1943. I got my commission, I got my wings, and Miriam and I were married.

I started my training in B-24 Bombers in El Paso, Texas. At that time there was considerable trouble with those planes. They were trying to use a lower octane gas and we were having some accidents. I had an instructor that taught five of us. This instructor's wife was going to have a baby so he didn't come to work one day and told the officers that he wouldn't be there. Later that day after the baby was born he came to the field. He took one of the other members of the crew that he was training and they took off. Just as they were taking off he had engine troubles. He told the tower he was going to land the plane on the highway just outside of El Paso. But then he said "Uh oh, here comes a bus." He had to crash the plane and was killed. His baby had been born that morning. One of the five of our crew out of our bunch in the training was killed too.

I was assigned to go to England to the eighth Air Force. We picked up a B-24 in Topeka, Kansas and we flew the B-24 to England. I named the airplane that we picked up "Me Worry."

Bombing Missions in Europe

On D-Plus-Two, the second day after the D-Day Invasion I went on my first mission. I went as a co-pilot in order to learn the proper procedures and how things are handled. I got a chance to see quite a bit of the early invasion by flying over it and seeing the big warships, all the landing craft, and everything that was going on down below.

After that first mission I took my crew in a plane named "Carol Marie." The men who flew the planes, such as I, were usually the airmen and they could be officers or enlisted men. Ten guys usually made up a crew on a B-24 there were four officers and six enlisted men. Our sixth mission was on June 20, 1944. We were on a deep penetration in Germany. We were going in to bomb a factory where they were processing artificial oil for aircraft. Our mission that day was to bomb that particular place in Politz, deep in Germany. During the flight, a plane joined our unit. The pilot said he had special bombing equipment and he wanted my place in the formation. So I left my spot in the formation, moved out, and he took my place.

About five minutes before we got to the target I told my co-pilot "We are going to drop bombs on his signal. Until then I want to look around and you fly the plane. I want to see what's going on." I looked at the plane that took my place just as he got a direct anti-aircraft hit. He still had his bombs on board and the plane disappeared. He just exploded from the direct hit by the anti-aircraft. The last thing I saw were the bomb bay doors and the wheels which were the biggest part of that airplane and that whole crew, ten men, just disappeared, gone right there, when the plane was hit. That plane was the one that took my place in the formation.

Then I saw anti-aircraft approaching us. A third explosion hit our plane. As a result the number three engine caught on fire and we started to



Ozzie (fourth from Left) and the Carol Marie crew on D-Day Plus 2

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lose altitude. We got hit a couple more times by the anti-aircraft. At that point you're really scared. However you still had your training procedures. You're busy doing a lot of the procedures hoping that you can take care of the situation.

We started down with our number three engine on fire. Just as we were going down in a slow spin I took over the controls and I got the plane straightened up. Then we had a propeller blade shot off of another engine so that engine wasn't any good either. It ended up that we had one good engine out of the four. As we took stock of the situation, the nose guns weren't working and ball turret on the bottom wasn't working either. We finally got the plane where we could hold altitude. We threw everything possible out of the aircraft as fast as we could to get rid of any excess weight.

We had armament the guys wore; it was heavy vests and such. They had a lot of weight. They were anti-flack protection. We threw a lot of equipment out into the Baltic; we were over water so we could rid of the stuff there. It just disappeared. The B-24 was a four-engine bomber; it was about as big a bomber as we had at that time in the war. I would say it was about 40 feet long.

About that time we had three German fighters start to come up to us. When my crew told me that, I knew that we couldn't challenge them because our nose guns and our ball turret weren't working. They are the machine guns we had for protection, two in the nose and two underneath and neither one of those were operating. I told the crew, "If they make a pass at us I'm going to drop a landing gear which is a signal.... "Bail out!" When the landing gear locks I'll hold the plane long enough for everybody to get out and I'll be the last one out because I am the pilot." The aircraft came up and took a look but never did anything. They just went on their way. We were just amazed. We kind of figured out they were out of ammunition or gas or otherwise they would have shot us out of the air, they would have got us. We couldn't have done much about it.

Prisoner of War

We continued to cross the Baltic Sea. I told the crew we were going to go to Sweden. We got across the Baltic and we landed in a grass field in Malmo, Sweden at the Bultafa Airport. The one engine had carried

us all the way across. When we landed and I shut the engine off, it was for the last time, it was frozen. I had burned it out using it so hard trying to get enough power to get there.

The plane coming in behind me crashed. Seven airmen out of the crew were killed in that plane. He came in right behind me trying to land in the same area. There was a hill and the field was beyond. I knew the hill was there so I came in high but he came in low and tried to get up over the hill. He stalled, spun out, and he slid right over the top of a Swedish ammunition dump. Then the plane spun over on its back as it crashed.

A Swedish ambulance came to the crash site. This was a field where they had an ambulance and Swedish pilots. A Swedish flyer had jumped on the running board of the ambulance. They went out to this plane that crashed. The Swedish flyer actually carried three airmen away from the plane before it exploded. The other crewmembers were all killed. He saved three lives.

Intern Prisoner of War

The Swedish soldiers were signaling me to take the plane to a certain spot to park it. Two soldiers jumped inside the airplane. They had their rifles and to make sure we didn't do something wrong like try to blow up the airplane or something. It scared the daylights out of me because the way they were dressed they looked just like Germans. They had helmets that were similar to the German helmets, they had gray uniforms, and they had bayonets on the end of their guns.

When I stopped the airplane I was just saying "Well, thank God I made it." I reached down to shut off the engine as I turned and looked there was a bayonet lying across my hand. The soldier was standing there and had the bayonet laying on my hand because they didn't want us to blow up anything. I said slowly, "e n g i n e s," and I turned off the engines switches. Then I said, "Radio" and I reached up and cut the radio off. I was pretty darn scared when that was all going on, I thought for a while we landed in Germany actually. But I figured well if we're in Germany there's nothing I can do here because our plane was done and I didn't even carry a gun. I wasn't about to do anything to start any problems.

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When we landed in that grass field in Malmo, Sweden there were five civilians who were there from the Liberator Factory. They went through the airplane and checked every detail. They wrote up all the damages to the plane and then on the bottom line they'd write 'justified.' Our landing in Sweden was deemed justified. Our plane had three of the four engines out and over 200 anti-aircraft punctures in the front.

In the field where we landed there was a man who posed as working for the American Embassy. My crew and I gave him our names and serial numbers. In those days you never gave any more information than that. We thought we were doing it for the Swedish but it turned out he was a German and so the Germans got all of our names.

The Swedish people were wonderful. The soldiers that we first met didn't speak any English. The ones that boarded the plane took me off and lined up my crew. They marched us over to where they had some more Americans. They had people there that started to talk in English to tell us that we were in Sweden and we would be considered interned prisoners of war. They told us some of the duties they would perform and that they would take care of us.

Sweden was a neutral country. We landed under military condition and so the rules were to keep us as prisoners. They did the same thing in Switzerland. Sweden and Switzerland were both neutral countries. If you landed there with any kind of armed bombers or fighters they would keep you there and call you a prisoner of war. We were called interned prisoners of war, which just meant you were in a neutral country, you were interned there. If they got any German planes in there, they would have treated the crews the same way.

The first ten days we stayed in a hotel in Falun, Sweden while they were trying to figure out where they were going to put us. There were some Germans in this hotel. We had some of them identified as German spies. They'd want to take us to dinner and they'd want to ask us questions about our planes.

Shortly after being captured in Sweden my wife got a telegram saying that I was missing in action. About that time Miriam had a job at Iowa Manufacturing. For thirty days my family, my mother, and everyone didn't know what had happened.

When in Sweden, I finally met a lady that had been born in the United States and had married an engineer in Sweden. She spoke English so I told her I would like her to write a letter to my wife, Miriam. She wrote that she lived in Stockholm, Sweden and that she had a husband and two children. She went on and then she wrote, 'Oh by the way, Uncle Ozzie, stopped in today.' Well that was the clue to tell Miriam that I was fine and in Sweden. My wife always said she believed that I was o.k. somewhere. The Swedish lady who wrote the letter didn't have to worry.

As far as Sweden went, we were treated royally. We lived in a beautiful resort town in a resort hotel, the Granna Hotel. The people were just as nice as they could be. We had freedom, the only rules that we really had we made in order to keep some order to knowing where we are to be available when it was determined it'd be our turn to escape.

The only thing that came about was that there would come a time before the war was over when it was our turn to escape from Sweden. When we escaped from Sweden about all we did was we went out to the airport and we got in to an old stripped down B-24. It was a real bad weather day in November of 1944. In those days the Germans didn't have all the equipment to track planes in bad weather. We flew across Norway back to England. All the details about when we escaped were controlled by our own embassy and our people.

When we got back to England they said we wouldn't be able to do anymore flying of the bombers over Germany because the Germans had all of our names and ranks. They got that information from the Swedish and the German spies. They had all that information on hand and if we were ever captured again we would be shot immediately as escaped prisoners of war.

Back in the United States

The rest of my time in the Air Force I was restricted to the United States. I couldn't go to any combat but I was flying all kinds of aircraft all over the United States. As far as anything that had happened in Sweden it was considered top secret until the war was over. I stayed in the reserve Air Force and I came home to Cedar Rapids in March of '46.

That's the way it goes.